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WORKS

OF

CHARLES DICKENS.

HOUSEHOLD EDITION.

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NICHOLAS NICKLEBY.

VOL. III.

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THE LIFE AND ADVENTURES

OF

NICHOLAS NICKLEBY.

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LIFE AND ADVENTURES

OF

NICHOLAS NICKLEBY.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

IN WHICH MR. RALPH NICKLEBY IS RELIEVED, BY A VERY EXPEDITIOUS PROCESS, FROM ALL COMMERCE WITH HIS RELATIONS.

Smike and Newman Noggs, who in his impatience had returned home long before the time agreed upon, sat before the fire, listening anxiously to every footstep on the stairs, and the slightest sound that stirred within the house, for the approach of Nicholas. Time had worn on, and it was growing late. He had promised to be back in an hour; and his prolonged absence began to excite considerable alarm in the minds of both, as was abundantly testified by the blank looks they cast upon each other at every new disappointment.

At length a coach was heard to stop, and Newman ran out to light Nicholas up the stairs. Beholding him in the trim described at the conclusion of the last chapter, he stood aghast in wonder and consternation.

"Don't be alarmed," said Nicholas, hurrying him back into the room. "There is no harm done, beyond what a basin of water can repair."

"No harm!" cried Newman, passing his hands hastily over the back and arms of Nicholas, as if to assure himself that he had broken no bones. "What have you been doing?"

"I know all," interrupted Nicholas; "I have heard a part, and guessed the rest. But before I remove one jot of these stains, I must hear the whole from you. You see I am collected. My resolution is taken. Now, my good friend, speak out; for the time for any palliation or concealment is past, and nothing will avail Ralph Nickleby now."

"Your dress is torn in several places; you walk lame, and I am sure are suffering pain," said Newman. "Let me see to your hurts first."

"I have no hurts to see to, beyond a little soreness and stiffness that will soon pass off," said Nicholas, seating himself with some difficulty. "But if I had fractured every limb, and still preserved my senses, you should not bandage one till you had told me what I have the right to know. Come," said Nicholas, giving his hand to Noggs. "You had a sister of your own, you told me once, who died before you fell into misfortune. Now think of her, and tell me, Newman."

"Yes, I will, I will," said Noggs. "I'll tell you the whole truth."

Newman did so. Nicholas nodded his head from time to time, as it corroborated the particulars he had already gleaned; but he fixed his eyes upon the fire, and did not look round once.

His recital ended, Newman insisted upon his young friend's stripping off his coat, and allowing whatever injuries he had received to be properly tended. Nicholas, after some opposition, at length consented, and, while

some pretty severe bruises on his arms and shoulders were being rubbed with oil and vinegar, and various other efficacious remedies which Newman borrowed from the different lodgers, related in what manner they had been received. The recital made a strong impression on the warm imagination of Newman; for when Nicholas came to the violent part of the quarrel, he rubbed so hard, as to occasion him the most exquisite pain, which he would not have exhibited, however, for the world, it being perfectly clear that, for the moment, Newman was operating on Sir Mulberry Hawk, and had quite lost sight of his real patient.

This martyrdom over, Nicholas arranged with Newman that while he was otherwise occupied next morning, arrangements should be made for his mother's immediately quitting her present residence, and also for despatching Miss La Creevy to break the intelligence to her. He then wrapped himself in Smike's great-coat, and repaired to the inn where they were to pass the night, and where (after writing a few lines to Ralph, the delivery of which was to be intrusted to Newman next day), he endeavored to obtain the repose of which he stood so much in need.

Drunken men, they say, may roll down precipices, and be quite unconscious of any serious personal inconvenience when their reason returns. The remark may possibly apply to injuries received in other kinds of violent excitement: certain it is, that although Nicholas experienced some pain on first awakening next morning, he sprung out of bed as the clock struck seven, with very little difficulty, and was soon as much on the alert as if nothing had occurred.

Merely looking into Smike's room, and telling him

that Newman Noggs would call for him very shortly, Nicholas descended into the street, and calling a hackney-coach, bade the man drive to Mrs. Wititterly's, according to the direction which Newman had given him on the previous night.

It wanted a quarter to eight when they reached Cadogan Place. Nicholas began to fear that no one might be stirring at that early hour, when he was relieved by the sight of a female servant, employed in cleaning the door-steps. By this functionary he was referred to the doubtful page, who appeared with dishevelled hair and a very warm and glossy face, as of a page who had just got out of bed.

By this young gentleman he was informed that Miss Nickleby was then taking her morning's walk in the gardens before the house. On the question being propounded whether he could go and find her, the page desponded and thought not; but being stimulated with a shilling, the page grew sanguine and thought he could.

"Say to Miss Nickleby that her brother is here, and in great haste to see her," said Nicholas.

The plated buttons disappeared with an alacrity most unusual to them, and Nicholas paced the room in a state of feverish agitation which made the delay even of a minute insupportable. He soon heard a light footstep which he well knew, and before he could advance to meet her, Kate had fallen on his neck and burst into tears.

"My darling girl," said Nicholas as he embraced her. "How pale you are!"

"I have been so unhappy here, dear brother," sobbed poor Kate; "so very, very miserable. Do not leave me here, dear Nicholas, or I shall die of a broken heart."

"I will leave you nowhere," answered Nicholas — "never again, Kate," he cried, moved in spite of himself as he folded her to his heart. "Tell me that I acted for the best. Tell me that we parted because I feared to bring misfortune on your head; that it was a trial to me no less than to yourself, and that if I did wrong it was in ignorance of the world and unknowingly."

"Why should I tell you what we know so well?" returned Kate soothingly. "Nicholas — dear Nicholas — how can you give way thus?"

"It is such bitter reproach to me to know what you have undergone," returned her brother; "to see you so much altered, and yet so kind and patient — God!" cried Nicholas, clenching his fist and suddenly changing his tone and manner, "it sets my whole blood on fire again. You must leave here with me directly; you should not have slept here last night, but that I knew all this too late. To whom can I speak, before we drive away?"

This question was most opportunely put, for at that instant Mr. Wititterly walked in, and to him Kate introduced her brother, who at once announced his purpose, and the impossibility of deferring it.

"The quarter's notice," said Mr. Wititterly, with the gravity of a man on the right side, "is not yet half expired. Therefore" —

"Therefore," interposed Nicholas, "the quarter's salary must be lost, sir. You will excuse this extreme haste, but circumstances require that I should immediately remove my sister, and I have not a moment's time to lose. Whatever she brought here I will send for, if you will allow me, in the course of the day."

Mr. Wititterly bowed, but offered no opposition to

Kate's immediate departure; with which, indeed, he was rather gratified than otherwise, Sir Tumley Snuffim having given it as his opinion, that she rather disagreed with Mrs. Wititterly's constitution.

"With regard to the trifle of salary that is due," said Mr. Wititterly, "I will" — here he was interrupted by a violent fit of coughing — "I will — owe it to Miss Nickleby."

Mr. Wititterly, it should be observed, was accustomed to owe small accounts, and to leave them owing. All men have some little pleasant way of their own; and this was Mr. Wititterly's.

"If you please," said Nicholas. And once more offering a hurried apology for so sudden a departure, he hurried Kate into the vehicle, and bade the man drive with all speed into the City.

To the City they went accordingly, with all the speed the hackney-coach could make; and as the horses happened to live at Whitechapel and to be in the habit of taking their breakfast there, when they breakfasted at all, they performed the journey with greater expedition than could reasonably have been expected.

Nicholas sent Kate up-stairs a few minutes before him, that his unlooked-for appearance might not alarm his mother, and when the way had been paved, presented himself with much duty and affection. Newman had not been idle, for there was a little cart at the door, and the effects were hurrying out already.

Now, Mrs. Nickleby was not the sort of person to be told anything in a hurry, or rather to comprehend anything of peculiar delicacy or importance on a short notice. Wherefore, although the good lady had been subjected to a full hour's preparation by little Miss La Creevy, and

was now addressed in most lucid terms both by Nicholas and his sister, she was in a state of singular bewilderment and confusion, and could by no means be made to comprehend the necessity of such hurried proceedings.

"Why don't you ask your uncle, my dear Nicholas, what he can possibly mean by it?" said Mrs. Nickleby.

"My dear mother," returned Nicholas, "the time for talking has gone by. There is but one step to take, and that is to cast him off with the scorn and indignation he deserves. Your own honor and good name demand that, after the discovery of his vile proceedings, you should not be beholden to him one hour, even for the shelter of these bare walls."

"To be sure," said Mrs. Nickleby, crying bitterly, "he is a brute, a monster; and the walls are very bare, and want painting too, and I have had this ceiling whitewashed at the expense of eighteenpence, which is a very distressing thing, considering that it is so much gone into your uncle's pocket. I never could have believed it — never."

"Nor I, nor anybody else," said Nicholas.

"Lord bless my life!" exclaimed Mrs. Nickleby. "To think that that Sir Mulberry Hawk should be such an abandoned wretch as Miss La Creevy says he is, Nicholas, my dear; when I was congratulating myself every day on his being an admirer of our dear Kate's, and thinking what a thing it would be for the family if he was to become connected with us, and use his interest to get you some profitable government place. There are very good places to be got about the court, I know; for a friend of ours (Miss Cropley, at Exeter, my dear Kate, you recollect), he had one, and I know that it was the chief part of his duty to wear silk stockings, and a bag

wig like a black watch-pocket; and to think that it should come to this after all — oh, dear, dear, it's enough to kill one, that it is!" With which expressions of sorrow, Mrs. Nickleby gave fresh vent to her grief, and wept piteously.

As Nicholas and his sister were by this time compelled to superintend the removal of the few articles of furniture, Miss La Creevy devoted herself to the consolation of the matron, and observed with great kindness of manner that she must really make an effort, and cheer up.

"Oh I dare say, Miss La Creevy," returned Mrs. Nickleby, with a petulance not unnatural in her unhappy circumstances, it's very easy to say cheer up, but if you had as many occasions to cheer up as I have had —— and there," said Mrs. Nickleby, stopping short. "Think of Mr. Pyke and Mr. Pluck, two of the most perfect gentlemen that ever lived, what am I to say to them — what can I say to them? Why, if I was to say to them, 'I'm told your friend Sir Mulberry is a base wretch,' they'd laugh at me."

"They will laugh no more at us, I take it," said Nicholas, advancing. "Come mother, there is a coach at the door, and until Monday, at all events, we will return to our old quarters."

— "Where everything is ready, and a hearty welcome into the bargain," added Miss La Creevy. "Now, let me go with you down-stairs."

But Mrs. Nickleby was not to be so easily moved, for first she insisted on going up-stairs to see that nothing had been left, and then on going down-stairs to see that everything had been taken away; and when she was getting into the coach she had a vision of a forgotten coffee-pot on the back-kitchen hob, and after she was shut in, a

dismal recollection of a green umbrella behind some unknown door. At last Nicholas, in a condition of absolute despair, ordered the coachman to drive away, and in the unexpected jerk of a sudden starting, Mrs. Nickleby lost a shilling among the straw, which fortunately confined her attention to the coach until it was too late to remember anything else.

Having seen everything safely out, discharged the servant, and locked the door, Nicholas jumped into a cabriolet and drove to a by-place near Golden Square where he had appointed to meet Noggs; and so quickly had everything been done, that it was barely half-past nine when he reached the place of meeting.

"Here is the letter for Ralph," said Nicholas, "and here the key. When you come to me this evening, not a word of last night. Ill news travels fast, and they will know it soon enough. Have you heard if he was much hurt?"

Newman shook his head.

"I will ascertain that myself without loss of time," said Nicholas.

"You had better take some rest," returned Newman. "You are fevered and ill."

Nicholas waved his hand carelessly, and concealing the indisposition he really felt, now that the excitement which had sustained him was over, took a hurried farewell of Newman Noggs, and left him.

Newman was not three minutes' walk from Golden Square, but in the course of that three minutes he took the letter out of his hat and put it in again twenty times at least. First the front, then the back, then the sides, then the superscription, then the seal, were objects of Newman's admiration. Then he held it at arm's length

as if to take in the whole at one delicious survey, and then he rubbed his hands in a perfect ecstasy with his commission.

He reached the office, hung his hat on its accustomed peg, laid the letter and key upon the desk, and waited impatiently until Ralph Nickleby should appear. After a few minutes, the well-known creaking of his boots was heard on the stairs, and then the bell rung.

"Has the post come in?"

"No."

"Any other letters?"

"One." Newman eyed him closely, and laid it on the desk.

"What's this?" asked Ralph, taking up the key.

"Left with the letter; — a boy brought them — quarter of an hour ago, or less."

Ralph glanced at the direction, opened the letter, and read as follows: —

"You are known to me now. There are no reproaches I could heap upon your head which would carry with them one thousandth part of the grovelling shame that this assurance will awaken even in your breast.

"Your brother's widow and her orphan child spurn the shelter of your roof, and shun you with disgust and loathing. Your kindred renounce you, for they know no shame but the ties of blood which bind them in name with you.

"You are an old man, and I leave you to the grave. May every recollection of your life cling to your false heart, and cast their darkness on your death-bed."

Ralph Nickleby read this letter twice, and frowning heavily, fell into a fit of musing; the paper fluttered

from his hand and dropped upon the floor, but he clasped his fingers, as if he held it still.

Suddenly, he started from his seat, and thrusting it all crumpled into his pocket, turned furiously to Newman Noggs, as though to ask him why he lingered. But Newman stood unmoved, with his back towards him, following up, with the worn and blackened stump of an old pen, some figures in an Interest-table which was pasted against the wall, and apparently quite abstracted from every other object.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

WHEREIN MR. RALPH NICKLEBY IS VISITED BY PERSONS WITH WHOM THE READER HAS BEEN ALREADY MADE ACQUAINTED.

"WHAT a demnition long time you have kept me ringing at this confounded old cracked tea-kettle of a bell, every tinkle of which is enough to throw a strong man into blue convulsions, upon my life and soul, oh demmit," — said Mr. Mantalini to Newman Noggs, scraping his boots, as he spoke, on Ralph Nickleby's scraper.

"I didn't hear the bell more than once," replied Newman.

"Then you are most immensely and outrigeously deaf," said Mr. Mantalini, "as deaf as a demnition post."

Mr. Mantalini had got by this time into the passage, and was making his way to the door of Ralph's office with very little ceremony, when Newman interposed his body; and hinting that Mr. Nickleby was unwilling to be disturbed, inquired whether the client's business was of a pressing nature.

"It is most demnebly particular," said Mr. Mantalini. "It is to melt some scraps of dirty paper into bright, shining, chinking, tinkling, demd mint sauce."

Newman uttered a significant grunt, and taking Mr. Mantalini's proffered card, limped with it into his master's office. As he thrust his head in at the door, he saw that Ralph had resumed the thoughtful posture into which he had fallen after perusing his nephew's letter, and that he seemed to have been reading it again, as he once more held it open in his hand. The glance was but momentary, for Ralph, being disturbed, turned to demand the cause of the interruption.

As Newman stated it, the cause himself swaggered into the room, and grasping Ralph's horny hand with uncommon affection, vowed that he had never seen him looking so well in all his life.

"There is quite a bloom upon your demd countenance," said Mr. Mantalini, seating himself unbidden, and arranging his hair and whiskers. "You look quite juvenile and jolly, demmit!"

"We are alone," returned Ralph, tartly. "What do you want with me?"

"Good!" cried Mr. Mantalini, displaying his teeth. "What did I want! Yes. Ha, ha! Very good. *What* did I want. Ha, ha! Oh dem!"

"What *do* you want, man?" demanded Ralph, sternly.

"Demnition discount," returned Mr. Mantalini, with a grin, and shaking his head waggishly.

"Money is scarce," said Ralph.

"Demd scarce, or I shouldn't want it," interrupted Mr. Mantalini.

"The times are bad, and one scarcely knows whom to trust," continued Ralph. "I don't want to do business just now, in fact I would rather not; but as you are a friend — how many bills have you there?"

"Two," returned Mr. Mantalini.

"What is the gross amount?"

"Demd trifling — five-and-seventy."

"And the dates?"

"Two months, and four."

"I'll do them for you — mind, for *you;* I wouldn't for many people — for five-and-twenty pounds," said Ralph, deliberately.

"Oh demmit!" cried Mr. Mantalini, whose face lengthened considerably at this handsome proposal.

"Why, that leaves you fifty," retorted Ralph. "What would you have? Let me see the names."

"You are so demd hard, Nickleby," remonstrated Mr. Mantalini.

"Let me see the names," replied Ralph, impatiently extending his hand for the bills. "Well! They are not sure, but they are safe enough. Do you consent to the terms, and will you take the money? I don't want you to do so. I would rather you didn't."

"Demmit, Nickleby, can't you" — began Mr. Mantalini.

"No," replied Ralph, interrupting him. "I can't. Will you take the money — down, mind; no delay, no going into the city and pretending to negotiate with some other party who has no existence and never had. Is it a bargain or is it not?"

Ralph pushed some papers from him as he spoke, and carelessly rattled his cash-box, as though by mere accident. The sound was too much for Mr. Mantalini. He closed the bargain directly it reached his ears, and Ralph told the money out upon the table.

He had scarcely done so, and Mr. Mantalini had not yet gathered it all up, when a ring was heard at the bell, and immediately afterwards Newman ushered in no less

a person than Madame Mantalini, at sight of whom Mr. Mantalini evinced considerable discomposure, and swept the cash into his pocket with remarkable alacrity.

"Oh, you *are* here," said Madame Mantalini, tossing her head.

"Yes, my life and soul, I am," replied her husband, dropping on his knees, and pouncing with kitten-like playfulness upon a stray sovereign. "I am here, my soul's delight, upon Tom Tidler's ground, picking up the demnition gold and silver."

"I am ashamed of you," said Madame Mantalini, with much indignation.

"Ashamed — of *me*, my joy? It knows it is talking demd charming sweetness, but naughty fibs," returned Mr. Mantalini. "It knows it is not ashamed of its own popolorum tibby."

Whatever were the circumstances which had led to such a result, it certainly appeared as though the popolorum tibby had rather miscalculated, for the nonce, the extent of his lady's affection. Madame Mantalini only looked scornful in reply; and, turning to Ralph, begged him to excuse her intrusion.

"Which is entirely attributable," said Madame, "to the gross misconduct and most improper behavior of Mr. Mantalini."

"Of me, my essential juice of pine-apple!"

"Of you," returned his wife. "But I will not allow it. I will not submit to be ruined by the extravagance and profligacy of any man. I call Mr. Nickleby to witness the course I intend to pursue with you."

"Pray don't call me to witness anything, ma'am," said Ralph. "Settle it between yourselves, settle it between yourselves."

"No, but I must beg you as a favor," said Madame Mantalini, "to hear me give him notice of what it is my fixed intention to do — my fixed intention, sir," repeated Madame Mantalini, darting an angry look at her husband.

"Will she call me, 'Sir'!" cried Mantalini. "Me who doat upon her with the demdest ardor! She, who coils her fascinations round me like a pure and angelic rattlesnake! It will be all up with my feelings; she will throw me into a demd state."

"Don't talk of feelings, sir," rejoined Madame Mantalini, seating herself, and turning her back upon him. "You don't consider mine."

"I do not consider yours, my soul!" exclaimed Mr. Mantalini.

"No," replied his wife.

And notwithstanding various blandishments on the part of Mr. Mantalini, Madame Mantalini still said no, and said it too with such determined and resolute ill-temper, that Mr. Mantalini was clearly taken aback.

"His extravagance, Mr. Nickleby," said Madame Mantalini, addressing herself to Ralph, who leant against his easy-chair with his hands behind him, and regarded the amiable couple with a smile of the supremest and most unmitigated contempt, — "His extravagance is beyond all bounds."

"I should scarcely have supposed it," answered Ralph, sarcastically.

"I assure you, Mr. Nickleby, however, that it is," returned Madame Mantalini. "It makes me miserable; I am under constant apprehensions, and in constant difficulty. And even this," said Madame Mantalini, wiping her eyes, "is not the worst. He took some papers of

value out of my desk this morning without asking my permission."

Mr. Mantalini groaned slightly, and buttoned his trousers-pocket.

"I am obliged," continued Madame Mantalini, "since our late misfortunes, to pay Miss Knag a great deal of money for having her name in the business, and I really cannot afford to encourage him in all his wastefulness. As I have no doubt that he came straight here, Mr. Nickleby, to convert the papers I have spoken of, into money, and as you have assisted us very often before, and are very much connected with us in this kind of matters, I wish you to know the determination at which his conduct has compelled me to arrive."

Mr. Mantalini groaned once more from behind his wife's bonnet, and fitting a sovereign into one of his eyes, winked with the other at Ralph. Having achieved this performance with great dexterity, he whipped the coin into his pocket, and groaned again with increased penitence.

"I have made up my mind," said Madame Mantalini, as tokens of impatience manifested themselves in Ralph's countenance, "to allowance him."

"To do what, my joy?" inquired Mr. Mantalini, who did not seem to have caught the words.

"To put him," said Madame Mantalini, looking at Ralph, and prudently abstaining from the slightest glance at her husband, lest his many graces should induce her to falter in her resolution, "to put him upon a fixed allowance; and I say that if he has a hundred and twenty pounds a year for his clothes and pocket-money, he may consider himself a very fortunate man."

Mr. Mantalini waited, with much decorum, to hear

the amount of the proposed stipend, but when it reached his ears, he cast his hat and cane upon the floor, and drawing out his pocket-handkerchief, gave vent to his feelings in a dismal moan.

"Demnition!" cried Mr. Mantalini, suddenly skipping out of his chair, and as suddenly skipping into it again, to the great discomposure of his lady's nerves. "But no. It is a demd horrid dream. It is not reality. No!"

Comforting himself with this assurance, Mr. Mantalini closed his eyes and waited patiently till such time as he should wake up.

"A very judicious arrangement," observed Ralph with a sneer, "if your husband will keep within it, ma'am — as no doubt he will."

"Demmit!" exclaimed Mr. Mantalini, opening his eyes at the sound of Ralph's voice, "it is a horrid reality. She is sitting there before me. There is the graceful outline of her form; it cannot be mistaken — there is nothing like it. The two countesses had no outlines at all, and the dowager's was a demd outline. Why is she so excruciatingly beautiful that I cannot be angry with her, even now?"

"You have brought it upon yourself, Alfred," returned Madame Mantalini — still reproachfully, but in a softened tone.

"I am a demd villain!" cried Mr. Mantalini, smiting himself on the head. "I will fill my pockets with change for a sovereign in half-pence and drown myself in the Thames; but I will not be angry with her, even then, for I will put a note in the twopenny-post as I go along, to tell her where the body is. She will be a lovely widow. I shall be a body. Some handsome women will cry; she will laugh demnebly."

"Alfred, you cruel, cruel creature," said Madame Mantalini, sobbing at the dreadful picture.

"She calls me cruel — me — me — who for her sake will become a demd, damp, moist, unpleasant body!" exclaimed Mr. Mantalini.

"You know it almost breaks my heart, even to hear you talk of such a thing," replied Madame Mantalini.

"Can I live to be mistrusted?" cried her husband. "Have I cut my heart into a demd extraordinary number of little pieces, and given them all away, one after another, to the same little engrossing demnition captivater, and can I live to be suspected by her! Demmit, no I can't."

"Ask Mr. Nickleby whether the sum I have mentioned is not a proper one," reasoned Madame Mantalini.

"I don't want any sum," replied her disconsolate husband; "I shall require no demd allowance. I will be a body."

On this repetition of Mr. Mantalini's fatal threat, Madame Mantalini wrung her hands, and implored the interference of Ralph Nickleby; and after a great quantity of tears and talking, and several attempts on the part of Mr. Mantalini to reach the door, preparatory to straightway committing violence upon himself, that gentleman was prevailed upon, with difficulty, to promise that he wouldn't be a body. This great point attained, Madame Mantalini argued the question of the allowance, and Mr. Mantalini did the same, taking occasion to show that he could live with uncommon satisfaction upon bread and water, and go clad in rags, but that he could not support existence with the additional burden of being mistrusted by the object of his most devoted and disinterested affection. This brought fresh tears into Madame

Mantalini's eyes, which having just begun to open to some few of the demerits of Mr. Mantalini, were only open a very little way, and could be easily closed again. The result was, that without quite giving up the allowance question, Madame Mantalini postponed its further consideration ; and Ralph saw, clearly enough, that Mr. Mantalini had gained a fresh lease of his easy life, and that, for some time longer at all events, his degradation and downfall were postponed.

" But it will come soon enough," thought Ralph ; " all love — bah ! that I should use the cant of boys and girls — is fleeting enough ; though that which has its sole root in the admiration of a whiskered face like that of yonder baboon, perhaps lasts the longest, as it originates in the greater blindness and is fed by vanity. Meantime the fools bring grist to my mill, so let them live out their day, and the longer it is, the better."

These agreeable reflections occurred to Ralph Nickleby, as sundry small caresses and endearments, supposed to be unseen, were exchanged between the objects of his thoughts.

" If you have nothing more to say, my dear, to Mr. Nickleby," said Madame Mantalini, " we will take our leaves. I am sure we have detained him, much too long already."

Mr. Mantalini answered, in the first instance, by tapping Madame Mantalini several times on the nose, and then, by remarking in words that he had nothing more to say.

" Demmit ! I have, though," he added almost immediately, drawing Ralph into a corner. " Here's an affair about your friend Sir Mulberry. Such a demd extraordinary out-of-the-way kind of thing as never was — eh ? "

"What do you mean?" asked Ralph.

"Don't you know, demmit?" asked Mr. Mantalini.

"I see by the paper that he was thrown from his cabriolet last night, and severely injured, and that his life is in some danger," answered Ralph with great composure; "but I see nothing extraordinary in that — accidents are not miraculous events, when men live hard, and drive after dinner."

"Whew!" cried Mr. Mantalini in a long shrill whistle. "Then don't you know how it was?"

"Not unless it was as I have just supposed," replied Ralph, shrugging his shoulders carelessly, as if to give his questioner to understand that he had no curiosity upon the subject.

"Demmit, you amaze me," cried Mantalini.

Ralph shrugged his shoulders again, as if it were no great feat to amaze Mr. Mantalini, and cast a wistful glance at the face of Newman Noggs, which had several times appeared behind a couple of panes of glass in the room-door; it being a part of Newman's duty, when unimportant people called, to make various feints of supposing that the bell had rung for him to show them out: by way of a gentle hint to such visitors that it was time to go.

"Don't you know," said Mr. Mantalini, taking Ralph by the button, "that it wasn't an accident at all, but a demd, furious, manslaughtering attack made upon him by your nephew?"

"What!" snarled Ralph, clenching his fists and turning a livid white.

"Demmit, Nickleby, you're as great a tiger as he is," said Mantalini, alarmed at these demonstrations.

"Go on," cried Ralph. "Tell me what you mean.

What is this story? Who told you? Speak," growled Ralph. "Do you hear me?"

"'Gad, Nickleby," said Mr. Mantalini, retreating towards his wife, "what a demneble fierce old evil genius you are! You're enough to frighten my life and soul out of her little delicious wits — flying all at once into such a blazing, ravaging, raging passion as never was, demmit!"

"Pshaw," rejoined Ralph, forcing a smile. "It is but manner."

"It is a demd uncomfortable, private-madhouse-sort of a manner," said Mr. Mantalini, picking up his cane.

Ralph affected to smile, and once more inquired from whom Mr. Mantalini had derived his information.

"From Pyke; and a demd, fine, pleasant, gentlemanly dog it is," replied Mantalini. "Demnition pleasant, and a tip-top sawyer."

"And what said he?" asked Ralph, knitting his brows.

"That it happened this way — that your nephew met him at a coffee-house, fell upon him with the most demneble ferocity, followed him to his cab, swore he would ride home with him, if he rode upon the horse's back or hooked himself on to the horse's tail; smashed his countenance, which is a demd fine countenance in its natural state; frightened the horse, pitched out Sir Mulberry and himself, and" —

"And was killed?" interposed Ralph with gleaming eyes. "Was he? Is he dead?"

Mantalini shook his head.

"Ugh," said Ralph, turning away. "Then he has done nothing — stay," he added, looking round again.

"He broke a leg or an arm, or put his shoulder out, or fractured his collar-bone, or ground a rib or two? His neck was saved for the halter, but he got some painful and slow-healing injury for his trouble — did he? You must have heard that, at least."

"No," rejoined Mantalini, shaking his head again. "Unless he was dashed into such little pieces that they blew away, he wasn't hurt, for he went off as quiet and comfortable as — as — as demnition," said Mr. Mantalini, rather at a loss for a simile.

"And what," said Ralph, hesitating a little, "what was the cause of quarrel?"

"You are the demdest, knowing hand," replied Mr. Mantalini, in an admiring tone, "the cunningest, rummest, superlativest old fox — oh dem! — to pretend now not to know that it was the little bright-eyed niece — the softest, sweetest, prettiest" ——

"Alfred!" interposed Madame Mantalini.

"She is always right," rejoined Mr. Mantalini soothingly, "and when she says it is time to go, it is time, and go she shall; and when she walks along the streets with her own tulip, the women shall say, with envy, she has got a demd fine husband; and the men shall say with rapture, he has got a demd fine wife; and they shall both be right and neither wrong, upon my life and soul — oh demmit!"

With which remarks, and many more, no less intellectual and to the purpose, Mr. Mantalini kissed the fingers of his gloves to Ralph Nickleby, and drawing his lady's arm through his, led her mincingly away.

"So, so," muttered Ralph, dropping into his chair; "this devil is loose again, and thwarting me, as he was born to do, at every turn. He told me once there should

be a day of reckoning between us, sooner or later. I'll make him a true prophet, for it shall surely come."

"Are you at home?" asked Newman, suddenly popping in his head.

"No," replied Ralph, with equal abruptness.

Newman withdrew his head, but thrust it in again.

"You're quite sure you're not at home, are you?" said Newman.

"What does the idiot mean?" cried Ralph, testily.

"He has been waiting nearly ever since they first came in, and may have heard your voice — that's all," said Newman, rubbing his hands.

"Who has?" demanded Ralph, wrought by the intelligence he had just heard, and his clerk's provoking coolness, to an intense pitch of irritation.

The necessity of a reply was superseded by the unlooked-for entrance of a third party — the individual in question — who, bringing his one eye (for he had but one) to bear on Ralph Nickleby, made a great many shambling bows, and sat himself down in an arm-chair, with his hands on his knees, and his short black trousers drawn up so high in the legs by the exertion of seating himself, that they scarcely reached below the tops of his Wellington boots.

"Why, this *is* a surprise!" said Ralph, bending his gaze upon the visitor, and half smiling as he scrutinized him attentively; "I should know your face, Mr. Squeers."

"Ah!" replied that worthy, "and you'd have know'd it better, sir, if it hadn't been for all that I've been a-going through. Just lift that little boy off the tall stool in the back-office, and tell him to come in here, will you, my man?" said Squeers, addressing himself to

Newman. "Oh, he's lifted his-self off. My son, sir, little Wackford. What do you think of him, sir, for a specimen of the Dotheboys Hall feeding? a'n't he fit to bust out of his clothes, and start the seams, and make the very buttons fly off with his fatness? Here's flesh!" cried Squeers, turning the boy about, and indenting the plumpest parts of his figure with divers pokes and punches, to the great discomposure of his son and heir. "Here's firmness, here's solidness! why you can hardly get up enough of him between your finger and thumb to pinch him anywheres."

In however good condition Master Squeers might have been, he certainly did not present this remarkable compactness of person, for on his father's closing his finger and thumb in illustration of his remark, he uttered a sharp cry, and rubbed the place in the most natural manner possible.

"Well," remarked Squeers, a little disconcerted, "I had him there; but that's because we breakfasted early this morning, and he hasn't had his lunch yet. Why you couldn't shut a bit of him in a door, when he's had his dinner. Look at them tears, sir," said Squeers, with a triumphant air, as Master Wackford wiped his eyes with the cuff of his jacket, "there's oiliness!"

"He looks well, indeed," returned Ralph, who, for some purposes of his own, seemed desirous to conciliate the school-master. "But how is Mrs. Squeers, and how are you?"

"Mrs. Squeers, sir," replied the proprietor of Dotheboys, "is as she always is — a mother to them lads, and a blessing, and a comfort, and a joy to all them as knows her. One of our boys — gorging his-self with vittles, and then turning ill; that's their way — got a abscess on

him last week. To see how she operated upon him with a penknife! Oh Lor'!" said Squeers, heaving a sigh, and nodding his head a great many times, "what a member of society that woman is!"

Mr. Squeers indulged in a retrospective look, for some quarter of a minute, as if this allusion to his lady's excellences had naturally led his mind to the peaceful village of Dotheboys near Greta Bridge in Yorkshire; and then looked at Ralph, as if waiting for him to say something.

"Have you quite recovered that scoundrel's attack?" asked Ralph.

"I've only just done it, if I've done it now," replied Squeers. "I was one blessed bruise, sir," said Squeers, touching first the roots of his hair, and then the toes of his boots, "from *here* to *there*. Vinegar and brown paper, vinegar and brown paper, from morning to night. I suppose there was a matter of half a ream of brown paper stuck upon me, from first to last. As I laid all of a heap in our kitchen, plastered all over, you might have thought I was a large brown paper parcel, chock full of nothing but groans. Did I groan loud, Wackford, or did I groan soft?" asked Mr. Squeers, appealing to his son.

"Loud," replied Wackford.

"Was the boys sorry to see me in such a dreadful condition, Wackford, or was they glad?" asked Mr. Squeers, in a sentimental manner.

"Gl"—

"Eh?" cried Squeers, turning sharp round.

"Sorry," rejoined his son.

"Oh!" said Squeers, catching him a smart box on the ear. "Then take your hands out of your pockets, and

don't stammer when you're asked a question. Hold your noise, sir, in a gentleman's office, or I'll run away from my family and never come back any more; and then what would become of all them precious and forlorn lads as would be let loose on the world, without their best friend at their elbers!"

"Were you obliged to have medical attendance?" inquired Ralph.

"Aye, was I," rejoined Squeers, "and a precious bill the medical attendant brought in too; but I paid it though."

Ralph elevated his eyebrows in a manner which might be expressive of either sympathy or astonishment — just as the beholder was pleased to take it.

"Yes, I paid it, every farthing," replied Squeers, who seemed to know the man he had to deal with, too well to suppose that any blinking of the question would induce him to subscribe towards the expenses; "I wasn't out of pocket by it after all, either."

"No!" said Ralph.

"Not a half-penny," replied Squeers. "The fact is, we have only one extra with our boys, and that is for doctors when required — and not then, unless we're sure of our customers. Do you see?"

"I understand," said Ralph.

"Very good," rejoined Squeers. "Then, after my bill was run up, we picked out five little boys (sons of small tradesmen, as was sure pay) that had never had the scarlet fever, and we sent one to a cottage where they'd got it, and he took it, and then we put the four others to sleep with him, and *they* took it, and then the doctor came and attended 'em once all round, and we divided my total among 'em, and added it on to their little bills, and the parents paid it. Ha! ha! ha!"

"And a good plan too," said Ralph, eying the schoolmaster stealthily.

"I believe you," rejoined Squeers. "We always do it. Why, when Mrs. Squeers was brought to bed with little Wackford here, we ran the hooping-cough through half-a-dozen boys, and charged her expenses among 'em, monthly nurse included. Ha! ha! ha!"

Ralph never laughed, but on this occasion he produced the nearest approach to it that he could, and waiting until Mr. Squeers had enjoyed the professional joke to his heart's content, inquired what had brought him to town.

"Some bothering law business," replied Squeers, scratching his head, "connected with an action, for what they call neglect of a boy. I don't know what they would have. He had as good grazing, that boy had, as there is about us."

Ralph looked as if he did not quite understand the observation.

"Grazing," said Squeers, raising his voice, under the impression that as Ralph failed to comprehend him, he must be deaf. "When a boy gets weak and ill and don't relish his meals, we give him a change of diet — turn him out, for an hour or so every day, into a neighbor's turnip-field, or sometimes, if it's a delicate case, a turnip-field and a piece of carrots alternately, and let him eat as many as he likes. There a'n't better land in the county than this perwerse lad grazed on, and yet he goes and catches cold and indigestion and what not, and then his friends brings a lawsuit against *me!* Now, you'd hardly suppose," added Squeers, moving in his chair with the impatience of an ill-used man, "that people's ingratitude would carry them quite as far as that; would you?"

"A hard case, indeed," observed Ralph.

"You don't say more than the truth when you say that," replied Squeers. "I don't suppose there's a man going, as possesses the fondness for youth that I do. There's youth to the amount of eight hundred pound a year, at Dotheboys Hall at this present time. I'd take sixteen hundred pound worth if I could get 'em, and be as fond of every individual twenty pound among 'em as nothing should equal it!"

"Are you stopping at your old quarters?" asked Ralph.

"Yes, we are at the Saracen," replied Squeers, "and as it don't want very long to the end of the half-year, we shall continney to stop there, till I've collected the money, and some new boys too, I hope. I've brought little Wackford up, on purpose to show to parents and guardians. I shall put him in the advertisement, this time. Look at that boy — himself a pupil — why he's a miracle of high feeding, that boy is!"

"I should like to have a word with you," said Ralph, who had both spoken and listened mechanically for some time, and seemed to have been thinking.

"As many words as you like, sir," rejoined Squeers. "Wackford, you go and play in the back-office, and don't move about too much or you'll get thin, and that won't do. You haven't got such a thing as twopence, Mr. Nickleby, have you?" said Squeers, rattling a bunch of keys in his coat-pocket, and muttering something about its being all silver.

"I — think I have;" said Ralph, very slowly, and producing, after much rummaging in an old drawer, a penny, a half-penny, and two farthings.

"Thankee," said Squeers, bestowing it upon his son. "Here! You go and buy a tart — Mr. Nickleby's man will show you where — and mind you buy a rich one. Pastry," added Squeers, closing the door on Master Wackford, "makes his flesh shine a good deal, and parents thinks that a healthy sign."

With this explanation, and a peculiarly knowing look to eke it out, Mr. Squeers moved his chair so as to bring himself opposite to Ralph Nickleby at no great distance off; and having planted it to his entire satisfaction, sat down.

"Attend to me," said Ralph, bending forward a little.

Squeers nodded.

"I am not to suppose," said Ralph, "that you are dolt enough to forgive or forget, very readily, the violence that was committed upon you, or the exposure which accompanied it?"

"Devil a bit," replied Squeers, tartly.

"Or to lose an opportunity of repaying it with interest, if you could get one?" said Ralph.

"Show me one, and try," rejoined Squeers.

"Some such object it was, that induced you to call on me?" said Ralph, raising his eyes to the schoolmaster's face.

"N — n — no, I don't know that," replied Squeers. "I thought that if it was in your power to make me, besides the trifle of money you sent, any compensation" ——

"Ah!" cried Ralph, interrupting him. "You needn't go on."

After a long pause, during which Ralph appeared absorbed in contemplation, he again broke silence, by asking:

"Who is this boy that he took with him?"

Squeers stated his name.

"Was he young or old, healthy or sickly, tractable or rebellious? Speak out, man," retorted Ralph.

"Why, he wasn't young," answered Squeers; "that is, not young for a boy, you know."

"That is, he was not a boy at all, I suppose?" interrupted Ralph.

"Well," returned Squeers, briskly, as if he felt relieved by the suggestion, "he might have been nigh twenty. He wouldn't seem so old, though, to them as didn't know him, for he was a little wanting here," touching his forehead; "nobody at home you know, if you knocked ever so often."

"And you *did* knock pretty often, I dare say?" muttered Ralph.

"Pretty well," returned Squeers with a grin.

"When you wrote to acknowledge the receipt of this trifle of money, as you call it," said Ralph, "you told me his friends had deserted him long ago, and that you had not the faintest clue or trace to tell you who he was. Is that the truth?"

"It is, worse luck!" replied Squeers, becoming more and more easy and familiar in his manner, as Ralph pursued his inquiries with the less reserve. "It's fourteen years ago, by the entry in my book, since a strange man brought him to my place, one autumn night, and left him there: paying five pound five, for his first quarter in advance. He might have been five or six year old at that time — not more."

"What more do you know about him?" demanded Ralph.

"Devilish little, I'm sorry to say," replied Squeers.

"The money was paid, for some six or eight year, and then it stopped. He had given an address in London, had this chap; but when it came to the point, of course nobody knowed anything about him. So I kept the lad out of — out of" —

"Charity?" suggested Ralph dryly.

"Charity, to be sure," returned Squeers, rubbing his knees, "and when he begins to be useful in a certain sort of way, this young scoundrel of a Nickleby comes and carries him off. But the most vexatious and aggeravating part of the whole affair is," said Squeers, dropping his voice, and drawing his chair still closer to Ralph, "that some questions have been asked about him at last — not of me, but, in a roundabout kind of way, of people in our village. So, that just when I might have had all arrears paid up, perhaps, and perhaps — who knows? such things have happened in our business before — a present besides for putting him out to a farmer, or sending him to sea, so that he might never turn up to disgrace his parents, supposing him to be a natural boy, as many of our boys are — damme, if that villain of a Nickleby don't collar him in open day, and commit as good as highway robbery upon my pocket."

"We will both cry quits with him before long," said Ralph, laying his hand on the arm of the Yorkshire school-master.

"Quits!" echoed Squeers. "Ah! and I should like to leave a small balance in his favor, to be settled when he can. I only wish Mrs. Squeers could catch hold of him. Bless her heart! She'd murder him, Mr. Nickleby — she would, as soon as eat her dinner."

"We will talk of this again," said Ralph. "I must

have time to think of it. To wound him through his own affections and fancies ——. If I could strike him through this boy" ——

"Strike him how you like, sir," interrupted Squeers, "only hit him hard enough, that's all — and with that, I'll say good-morning. Here! — just chuck that little boy's hat off that corner-peg, and lift him off the stool, will you?"

Bawling these requests to Newman Noggs, Mr. Squeers betook himself to the little back-office, and fitted on his child's hat with parental anxiety, while Newman, with his pen behind his ear, sat, stiff and immovable, on his stool, regarding the father and son by turns with a broad stare.

"He's a fine boy, a'n't he?" said Squeers, throwing his head a little on one side, and falling back to the desk, the better to estimate the proportions of little Wackford.

"Very," said Newman.

"Pretty well swelled out, a'n't he?" pursued Squeers. "He has the fatness of twenty boys, he has."

"Ah!" replied Newman, suddenly thrusting his face into that of Squeers, "he has; — the fatness of twenty! — more! He's got it all. God help the others. Ha! ha! Oh Lord!"

Having uttered these fragmentary observations, Newman dropped upon his desk and began to write with most marvellous rapidity.

"Why, what does the man mean?" cried Squeers, coloring. "Is he drunk?"

Newman made no reply.

"Is he mad?" said Squeers.

But, still Newman betrayed no consciousness of any

presence save his own; so, Mr. Squeers comforted himself by saying that he was both drunk *and* mad; and, with this parting observation, he led his hopeful son away.

In exact proportion as Ralph Nickleby became conscious of a struggling and lingering regard for Kate, had his detestation of Nicholas augmented. It might be, that to atone for the weakness of inclining to any one person, he held it necessary to hate some other, more intensely than before; but such had been the course of his feelings. And now, to be defied and spurned, to be held up to her in the worst and most repulsive colors, to know that she was taught to hate and despise him: to feel that there was infection in his touch, and taint in his companionship — to know all this, and to know that the mover of it all was that same boyish poor relation who had twitted him in their very first interview, and openly bearded and braved him since, wrought his quiet and stealthy malignity to such a pitch, that there was scarcely anything he would not have hazarded to gratify it, if he could have seen his way to some immediate retaliation.

But, fortunately for Nicholas, Ralph Nickleby did not; and although he cast about, all that day, and kept a corner of his brain working on the one anxious subject through all the round of schemes and business that came with it, night found him at last, still harping on the same theme, and still pursuing the same unprofitable reflections.

"When my brother was such as he," said Ralph, "the first comparisons were drawn between us — always in my disfavor. *He* was open, liberal, gallant, gay; *I* a crafty hunks of cold and stagnant blood, with no passion

but love of saving, and no spirit beyond a thirst for gain. I recollected it well when I first saw this whipster; but I remember it better now."

He had been occupied in tearing Nicholas's letter into atoms; and as he spoke, he scattered it in a tiny shower about him.

"Recollections like these," pursued Ralph, with a bitter smile, "flock upon me — when I resign myself to them — in crowds, and from countless quarters. As a portion of the world affect to despise the power of money, I must try and show them what it is."

And being, by this time, in a pleasant frame of mind for slumber, Ralph Nickleby went to bed.

CHAPTER XXXV.

SMIKE BECOMES KNOWN TO MRS. NICKLEBY AND KATE. NICHOLAS ALSO MEETS WITH NEW ACQUAINTANCES. BRIGHTER DAYS SEEM TO DAWN UPON THE FAMILY.

HAVING established his mother and sister in the apartments of the kind-hearted miniature-painter, and ascertained that Sir Mulberry Hawk was in no danger of losing his life, Nicholas turned his thoughts to poor Smike, who, after breakfasting with Newman Noggs, had remained, in a disconsolate state, at that worthy creature's lodgings, waiting, with much anxiety, for further intelligence of his protector.

"As he will be one of our own little household, wherever we live, or whatever fortune is in reserve for us," thought Nicholas, "I must present the poor fellow in due form. They will be kind to him for his own sake, and if not (on that account solely) to the full extent I could wish, they will stretch a point, I am sure, for mine."

Nicholas said "they," but his misgivings were confined to one person. He was sure of Kate, but he knew his mother's peculiarities, and was not quite so certain that Smike would find favor in the eyes of Mrs. Nickleby.

"However" thought Nicholas as he departed on his

benevolent errand; "she cannot fail to become attached to him, when she knows what a devoted creature he is, and as she must quickly make the discovery, his probation will be a short one."

"I was afraid," said Smike, overjoyed to see his friend again, "that you had fallen into some fresh trouble; the time seemed so long, at last, that I almost feared you were lost."

"Lost!" replied Nicholas gayly. "You will not be rid of me so easily, I promise you. I shall rise to the surface many thousand times yet, and the harder the thrust that pushes me down, the more quickly I shall rebound, Smike. But come; my errand here is to take you home."

"Home!" faltered Smike, drawing timidly back.

"Aye," rejoined Nicholas, taking his arm. "Why not?"

"I had such hopes once," said Smike; "day and night, day and night, for many years. I longed for home till I was weary, and pined away with grief, but now" ——

"And what now?" asked Nicholas, looking kindly in his face. "What now, old friend?"

"I could not part from you to go to any home on earth," replied Smike, pressing his hand; "except one, except one. I shall never be an old man; and if your hand placed me in the grave, and I could think, before I died, that you would come and look upon it sometimes with one of your kind smiles, and in the summer weather, when everything was alive — not dead like me — I could go to that home, almost without a tear."

"Why do you talk thus, poor boy, if your life is a happy one with me?" said Nicholas.

"Because *I* should change; not those about me. And if they forgot me, *I* should never know it," replied Smike. "In the church-yard we are all alike, but here there are none like me. I am a poor creature, but I know that."

"You are a foolish, silly creature," said Nicholas cheerfully. "If that is what you mean, I grant you that. Why, here's a dismal face for ladies' company! — my pretty sister too, whom you have so often asked me about. Is this your Yorkshire gallantry? For shame! for shame!"

Smike brightened up and smiled.

"When I talk of homes," pursued Nicholas, "I talk of mine — which is yours of course. If it were defined by any particular four walls and a roof, God knows I should be sufficiently puzzled to say whereabouts it lay; but that is not what I mean. When I speak of home, I speak of the place where — in default of a better — those I love are gathered together; and if that place were a gypsy's tent, or a barn, I should call it by the same good name notwithstanding. And now, for what is my present home, which, however alarming your expectations may be, will neither terrify you by its extent nor its magnificence."

So saying, Nicholas took his companion by the arm, and saying a great deal more to the same purpose, and pointing out various things to amuse and interest him as they went along, led the way to Miss La Creevy's house.

"And this, Kate," said Nicholas, entering the room where his sister sat alone, "is the faithful friend and affectionate fellow-traveller whom I prepared you to receive."

Poor Smike was bashful, and awkward, and fright-

ened enough, at first, but Kate advanced towards him so kindly, and said, in such a sweet voice, how anxious she had been to see him after all her brother had told her, and how much she had to thank him for having comforted Nicholas so greatly in their very trying reverses, that he began to be very doubtful whether he should shed tears or not, and became still more flurried. However, he managed to say, in a broken voice, that Nicholas was his only friend, and that he would lay down his life to help him; and Kate, although she was so kind and considerate, seemed to be so wholly unconscious of his distress and embarrassment, that he recovered almost immediately and felt quite at home.

Then, Miss La Creevy came in; and to her Smike had to be presented also. And Miss La Creevy was very kind too, and wonderfully talkative: — not to Smike, for that would have made him uneasy at first, but to Nicholas and his sister. Then, after a time, she would speak to Smike himself now and then, asking him whether he was a judge of likenesses, and whether he thought that picture in the corner was like herself, and whether he didn't think it would have looked better if she had made herself ten years younger, and whether he didn't think, as a matter of general observation, that young ladies looked better not only in pictures but out of them too, than old ones; with many more small jokes and facetious remarks, which were delivered with such good-humor and merriment, that Smike thought, within himself, she was the nicest lady he had ever seen; even nicer than Mrs. Grudden, of Mr. Vincent Crummles's theatre: and she was a nice lady too, and talked, perhaps more, but certainly louder, than Miss La Creevy.

At length the door opened again, and a lady in mourn-

ing came in; and Nicholas kissing the lady in mourning affectionately, and calling her his mother, led her towards the chair from which Smike had risen when she entered the room.

"You are always kind-hearted, and anxious to help the oppressed, my dear mother," said Nicholas, "so you will be favorably disposed towards him, I know."

"I am sure, my dear Nicholas," replied Mrs.Nickleby, looking very hard at her new friend, and bending to him with something more of majesty than the occasion seemed to require,—"I am sure any friend of yours has, as indeed he naturally ought to have, and must have, of course, you know — a great claim upon me, and of course, it is a very great pleasure to me to be introduced to anybody you take an interest in — there can be no doubt about that; none at all; not the least in the world," said Mrs. Nickleby. "At the same time I must say, Nicholas, my dear, as I used to say to your poor dear papa, when he *would* bring gentlemen home to dinner, and there was nothing in the house, that if he had come the day before yesterday — no, I don't mean the day before yesterday now; I should have said, perhaps, the year before last — we should have been better able to entertain him."

With which remarks, Mrs. Nickleby turned to her daughter, and inquired, in an audible whisper, whether the gentleman was going to stop all night.

"Because, if he is, Kate, my dear," said Mrs. Nickleby, "I don't see that it's possible for him to sleep anywhere, and that's the truth."

Kate stepped gracefully forward, and without any show of annoyance or irritation, breathed a few words into her mother's ear.

"La, Kate, my dear," said Mrs. Nickleby, shrinking

back, "how you do tickle one. Of course, I understand *that*, my love, without your telling me; and I said the same to Nicholas, and I *am* very much pleased. You didn't tell me, Nicholas, my dear," added Mrs. Nickleby, turning round with an air of less reserve than she had before assumed, "what your friend's name is."

"His name, mother," replied Nicholas, "is Smike."

The effect of this communication was by no means anticipated; but the name was no sooner pronounced, than Mrs. Nickleby dropped upon a chair, and burst into a fit of crying.

"What is the matter?" exclaimed Nicholas, running to support her.

"It's so like Pyke," cried Mrs. Nickleby; "so exactly like Pyke. Oh! don't speak to me — I shall be better presently."

And after exhibiting every symptom of slow suffocation, in all its stages, and drinking about a teaspoonful of water from a full tumbler, and spilling the remainder, Mrs. Nickleby *was* better, and remarked, with a feeble smile, that she was very foolish, she knew.

"It's a weakness in our family," said Mrs. Nickleby, "so, of course, I can't be blamed for it. Your grandmamma, Kate, was exactly the same — precisely. The least excitement, the slightest surprise, she fainted away directly. I have heard her say, often and often, that when she was a young lady, and before she was married, she was turning a corner into Oxford Street one day, when she ran against her own hair-dresser, who, it seems, was escaping from a bear; — the mere suddenness of the encounter made her faint away, directly. Wait, though," added Mrs. Nickleby, pausing to consider, "Let me be sure I'm right. Was it her hair-dresser

who had escaped from a bear, or was it a bear who had escaped from her hair-dresser's? I declare I can't remember just now, but the hair-dresser was a very handsome man, I know, and quite a gentleman in his manners; so that it has nothing to do with the point of the story."

Mrs. Nickleby having fallen imperceptibly into one of her retrospective moods, improved in temper from that moment, and glided, by an easy change of the conversation occasionally, into various other anecdotes, no less remarkable for their strict application to the subject in hand.

"Mr. Smike is from Yorkshire, Nicholas, my dear?" said Mrs. Nickleby, after dinner, and when she had been silent for some time.

"Certainly, mother," replied Nicholas. "I see you have not forgotten his melancholy history."

"O dear no," cried Mrs. Nickleby. "Ah! melancholy, indeed. You don't happen, Mr. Smike, ever to have dined with the Grimbles of Grimble Hall, somewhere in the North Riding, do you?" said the good lady, addressing herself to him. "A very proud man, Sir Thomas Grimble, with six grown-up and most lovely daughters, and the finest park in the county."

"My dear mother," reasoned Nicholas, "Do you suppose that the unfortunate outcast of a Yorkshire school was likely to receive many cards of invitation from the nobility and gentry in the neighborhood?"

"Really, my dear, I don't know why it should be so very extraordinary," said Mrs. Nickleby. "I know that when *I* was at school, I always went at least twice every half-year to the Hawkinses at Taunton Vale, and they are much richer than the Grimbles, and connected with

them in marriage; so you see it's not so very unlikely, after all."

Having put down Nicholas in this triumphant manner, Mrs. Nickleby was suddenly seized with a forgetfulness of Smike's real name, and an irresistible tendency to call him Mr. Slammons; which circumstance she attributed to the remarkable similarity of the two names in point of sound, both beginning with an S, and moreover being spelt with an M. But whatever doubt there might be on this point, there was none as to his being a most excellent listener; which circumstance had considerable influence in placing them on the very best terms, and in inducing Mrs. Nickleby to express the highest opinion of his general deportment and disposition.

Thus, the little circle remained, on the most amicable and agreeable footing, until the Monday morning, when Nicholas withdrew himself from it for a short time, seriously to reflect upon the state of his affairs, and to determine, if he could, upon some course of life, which would enable him to support those who were so entirely dependent upon his exertions.

Mr. Crummles occurred to him more than once; but although Kate was acquainted with the whole history of his connection with that gentleman, his mother was not; and he foresaw a thousand fretful objections, on her part, to his seeking a livelihood upon the stage. There were graver reasons, too, against his returning to that mode of life. Independently of those arising out of its spare and precarious earnings, and his own internal conviction that he could never hope to aspire to any great distinction, even as a provincial actor, how could he carry his sister from town to town, and place to place, and debar her from any other associates than those with whom he

would be compelled, almost without distinction, to mingle? "It won't do," said Nicholas, shaking his head; "I must try something else."

It was much easier to make this resolution than to carry it into effect. With no greater experience of the world than he had acquired for himself in his short trials; with a sufficient share of headlong rashness and precipitation (qualities not altogether unnatural at his time of life); with a very slender stock of money, and a still more scanty stock of friends; what could he do? "Egad!" said Nicholas, "I'll try that Register Office again."

He smiled at himself as he walked away, with a quick step; for, an instant before, he had been internally blaming his own precipitation. He did not laugh himself out of the intention, however, for on he went: picturing to himself, as he approached the place, all kinds of splendid possibilities, and impossibilities too, for that matter, and thinking himself, perhaps with good reason, very fortunate to be endowed with so buoyant and sanguine a temperament.

The office looked just the same as when he had left it last, and, indeed, with one or two exceptions, there seemed to be the very same placards in the window that he had seen before. There were the same unimpeachable masters and mistresses in want of virtuous servants, and the same virtuous servants in want of unimpeachable masters and mistresses, and the same magnificent estates for the investment of capital, and the same enormous quantities of capital to be invested in estates, and, in short, the same opportunities of all sorts for people who wanted to make their fortunes. And a most extraordinary proof it was of the national prosperity, that people

had not been found to avail themselves of such advantages long ago.

As Nicholas stopped to look in at the window, an old gentleman happened to stop too ; and Nicholas, carrying his eye along the window-panes from left to right in search of some capital-text placard, which should be applicable to his own case, caught sight of this old gentleman's figure, and instinctively withdrew his eyes from the window, to observe the same more closely.

He was a sturdy old fellow in a broad-skirted blue coat, made pretty large, to fit easily, and with no particular waist ; his bulky legs clothed in drab breeches and high gaiters, and his head protected by a low-crowned broad-brimmed white hat, such as a wealthy grazier might wear. He wore his coat buttoned ; and his dimpled double-chin rested in the folds of a white neckerchief — not one of your stiff-starched apoplectic cravats, but a good, easy, old-fashioned white neck-cloth that a man might go to bed in and be none the worse for. But what principally attracted the attention of Nicholas, was the old gentleman's eye, — never was such a clear, twinkling, honest, merry, happy eye, as that. And there he stood, looking a little upward, with one hand thrust into the breast of his coat, and the other playing with his old-fashioned gold watch-chain : his head thrown a little on one side, and his hat a little more on one side than his head, (but that was evidently accident ; not his ordinary way of wearing it,) with such a pleasant smile playing about his mouth, and such a comical expression of mingled slyness, simplicity, kind-heartedness, and good-humor, lighting up his jolly old face, that Nicholas would have been content to have stood there, and looked at him until evening, and to have forgotten, meanwhile, that there

was such a thing as a soured mind or a crabbed countenance to be met with in the whole wide world.

But, even a very remote approach to this gratification was not to be made, for although he seemed quite unconscious of having been the subject of observation, he looked casually at Nicholas; and the latter, fearful of giving offence, resumed his scrutiny of the window instantly.

Still, the old gentleman stood there, glancing from placard to placard, and Nicholas could not forbear raising his eyes to his face again. Grafted upon the quaintness and oddity of his appearance, was something so indescribably engaging, and bespeaking so much worth, and there were so many little lights hovering about the corners of his mouth and eyes, that it was not a mere amusement, but a positive pleasure and delight to look at him.

This being the case, it is no wonder that the old man caught Nicholas in the fact, more than once. At such times, Nicholas colored and looked embarrassed: for the truth is, that he had begun to wonder whether the stranger could, by any possibility, be looking for a clerk or secretary; and thinking this, he felt as if the old gentleman must know it.

Long as all this takes to tell, it was not more than a couple of minutes in passing. As the stranger was moving away, Nicholas caught his eye again, and, in the awkwardness of the moment, stammered out an apology.

"No offence — Oh no offence!" said the old man.

This was said in such a hearty tone, and the voice was so exactly what it should have been from such a speaker, and there was such a cordiality in the manner, that Nicholas was emboldened to speak again.

"A great many opportunities here, sir," he said, half smiling as he motioned towards the window.

"A great many people willing and anxious to be employed have seriously thought so very often, I dare say," replied the old man. "Poor fellows, poor fellows!"

He moved away, as he said this; but, seeing that Nicholas was about to speak, good-naturedly slackened his pace, as if he were unwilling to cut him short. After a little of that hesitation which may be sometimes observed between two people in the street who have exchanged a nod, and are both uncertain whether they shall turn back and speak, or not, Nicholas found himself at the old man's side.

"You were about to speak, young gentleman; what were you going to say?"

"Merely that I almost hoped — I mean to say, thought — you had some object in consulting those advertisements," said Nicholas.

"Aye, aye? what object now — what object?" returned the old man, looking slyly at Nicholas. "Did you think I wanted a situation now — Eh? Did you think I did?"

Nicholas shook his head.

"Ha! ha!" laughed the old gentleman, rubbing his hands and wrists as if he were washing them. "A very natural thought, at all events, after seeing me gazing at those bills, I thought the same of you, at first; upon my word I did."

"If you had thought so at last, too, sir, you would not have been far from the truth," rejoined Nicholas.

"Eh?" cried the old man, surveying him from head to foot. "What! Dear me! No, no. Well-behaved

young gentleman reduced to such a necessity! No no, no no."

Nicholas bowed, and bidding him good-morning, turned upon his heel.

"Stay," said the old man, beckoning him into a by-street, where they could converse with less interruption. "What d'ye mean, eh?"

"Merely that your kind face and manner — both so unlike any I have ever seen — tempted me into an avowal, which, to any other stranger in this wilderness of London, I should not have dreamt of making," returned Nicholas.

"Wilderness! Yes it is, it is. Good! It *is* a wilderness," said the old man with much animation. "It was a wilderness to me once. I came here barefoot — I have never forgotten it. Thank God!" and he raised his hat from his head, and looked very grave.

"What's the matter — what is it — how did it all come about?" said the old man, laying his hand on the shoulder of Nicholas, and walking him up the street. "You're — Eh?" laying his finger on the sleeve of his black coat. "Who's it for — eh?"

"My father," replied Nicholas.

"Ah!" said the old gentleman quickly. "Bad thing for a young man to lose his father. Widowed mother, perhaps?"

Nicholas sighed.

"Brothers and sisters too — eh?"

"One sister," rejoined Nicholas.

"Poor thing, poor thing! You're a scholar too, I dare say?" said the old man, looking wistfully into the face of the young one.

"I have been tolerably well educated," said Nicholas.

"Fine thing," said the old gentleman, "education a great thing — a very great thing — I never had any. I admire it the more in others. A very fine thing — yes, yes. Tell me more of your history. Let me hear it all. No impertinent curiosity — no, no, no."

There was something so earnest and guileless in the way in which all this was said, and such a complete disregard of all conventional restraints and coldnesses, that Nicholas could not resist it. Among men who have any sound and sterling qualities, there is nothing so contagious as pure openness of heart. Nicholas took the infection instantly, and ran over the main points of his little history without reserve: merely suppressing names, and touching as lightly as possible upon his uncle's treatment of Kate. The old man listened with great attention, and when he had concluded, drew his arm eagerly through his own.

"Don't say another word — not another word," said he. "Come along with me. We mustn't lose a minute."

So saying, the old gentleman dragged him back into Oxford Street, and hailing an omnibus on its way to the city, pushed Nicholas in before him, and followed, himself.

As he appeared in a most extraordinary condition of restless excitement, and whenever Nicholas offered to speak, immediately interposed with — "Don't say another word, my dear sir, on any account — not another word," the young man thought it better to attempt no further interruption. Into the city they journeyed accordingly, without interchanging any conversation; and the farther they went, the more Nicholas wondered what the end of the adventure could possibly be.

The old gentleman got out, with great alacrity, when

they reached the Bank, and once more taking Nicholas by the arm, hurried him along Threadneedle Street, and through some lanes and passages on the right, until they, at length, emerged in a quiet shady little square. Into the oldest and cleanest-looking house of business in the square, he led the way. The only inscription on the door-post was "Cheeryble, Brothers;" but from a hasty glance at the directions of some packages which were lying about, Nicholas supposed that the Brothers Cheeryble were German merchants.

Passing through a warehouse which presented every indication of a thriving business, Mr. Cheeryble (for such Nicholas supposed him to be, from the respect which had been shown him by the warehousemen and porters whom they passed) led him into a little partitioned-off counting-house like a large glass-case, in which counting-house there sat — as free from dust and blemish as if he had been fixed into the glass-case before the top was put on, and had never come out since — a fat, elderly, large-faced, clerk, with silver spectacles and a powdered head.

"Is my brother in his room, Tim?" said Mr. Cheeryble, with no less kindness of manner than he had shown to Nicholas.

"Yes he is, sir," replied the fat clerk, turning his spectacle-glasses towards his principal, and his eyes towards Nicholas, "but Mr. Trimmers is with him."

"Aye! And what has he come about, Tim?" said Mr. Cheeryble.

"He is getting up a subscription for the widow and family of a man who was killed in the East India Docks this morning, sir," rejoined Tim. "Smashed, sir, by a cask of sugar."

"He is a good creature," said Mr. Cheeryble, with

great earnestness. "He is a kind soul. I am very much obliged to Trimmers. Trimmers is one of the best friends we have. He makes a thousand cases known to us that we should never discover of ourselves. I am *very* much obliged to Trimmers." Saying which, Mr. Cheeryble rubbed his hands with infinite delight, and Mr. Trimmers happening to pass the door that instant, on his way out, shot out after him and caught him by the hand.

"I owe you a thousand thanks, Trimmers — ten thousand thanks — I take it very friendly of you — very friendly indeed," said Mr. Cheeryble, dragging him into a corner to get out of hearing. "How many children are there, and what has my brother Ned given, Trimmers?"

"There are six children," replied the gentleman, "and your brother has given us twenty pounds."

"My brother Ned is a good fellow, and you're a good fellow too, Trimmers," said the old man, shaking him by both hands with trembling eagerness. "Put me down for another twenty — or — stop a minute, stop a minute. We mustn't look ostentatious; put me down ten pound, and Tim Linkinwater ten pound. A check for twenty pound for Mr. Trimmers, Tim. God bless you, Trimmers — and come and dine with us some day this week; you'll always find a knife and fork, and we shall be delighted. Now, my dear sir — check from Mr. Linkinwater, Tim. Smashed by a cask of sugar, and six poor children — oh dear, dear, dear!"

Talking on in this strain, as fast as he could, to prevent any friendly remonstrances from the collector of the subscription on the large amount of his donation, Mr. Cheeryble led Nicholas, equally astonished and affected

by what he had seen and heard in this short space, to the half-opened door of another room.

"Brother Ned," said Mr. Cheeryble, tapping with his knuckles, and stooping to listen, "are you busy, my dear brother, or can you spare time for a word or two with me?"

"Brother Charles, my dear fellow," replied a voice from the inside; so like in its tones to that which had just spoken, that Nicholas started, and almost thought it was the same, "Don't ask me such a question, but come in directly."

They went in, without further parley. What was the amazement of Nicholas when his conductor advanced, and exchanged a warm greeting with another old gentleman, the very type and model of himself — the same face, the same figure, the same coat, waistcoat, and neckcloth, the same breeches and gaiters — nay, there was the very same white hat hanging against the wall!

As they shook each other by the hand: the face of each lighted up by beaming looks of affection, which would have been most delightful to behold in infants, and which, in men so old, was inexpressibly touching: Nicholas could observe that the last old gentleman was something stouter than his brother; this, and a slight additional shade of clumsiness in his gait and stature, formed the only perceptible difference between them. Nobody could have doubted their being twin brothers.

"Brother Ned," said Nicholas's friend, closing the room-door, "here is a young friend of mine, that we must assist. We must make proper inquiries into his statements, in justice to him as well as to ourselves, and if they are confirmed — as I feel assured they will be — we must assist him, we must assist him, brother Ned."

"It is enough, my dear brother, that you say we should," returned the other. "When you say that, no further inquiries are needed. He *shall* be assisted. What are his necessities, and what does he require? Where is Tim Linkinwater? Let us have him here."

Both the brothers, it may be here remarked, had a very emphatic and earnest delivery; both had lost nearly the same teeth, which imparted the same peculiarity to their speech; and both spoke as if, besides possessing the utmost serenity of mind that the kindliest and most unsuspecting nature could bestow, they had, in collecting the plums from Fortune's choicest pudding, retained a few for present use, and kept them in their mouths.

"Where is Tim Linkinwater?" said brother Ned.

"Stop, stop, stop!" said brother Charles, taking the other aside. "I've a plan, my dear brother, I've a plan. Tim is getting old, and Tim has been a faithful servant, brother Ned; and I don't think pensioning Tim's mother and sister, and buying a little tomb for the family when his poor brother died, was a sufficient recompense for his faithful services."

"No, no, no," replied the other. "Certainly not. Not half enough, not half."

"If we could lighten Tim's duties," said the old gentleman, "and prevail upon him to go into the country, now and then, and sleep in the fresh air, besides, two or three times a week, (which he could, if he began business an hour later in the morning,) old Tim Linkinwater would grow young again in time; and he's three good years our senior now. Old Tim Linkinwater young again! Eh, brother Ned, eh? Why, I recollect old Tim Linkinwater quite a little boy, don't you? Ha, ha, ha! Poor Tim, poor Tim!"

And the fine old fellows laughed pleasantly together: each with a tear of regard for old Tim Linkinwater, standing in his eye.

"But hear this first — hear this first, brother Ned," said the old man, hastily, placing two chairs, one on each side of Nicholas. "I'll tell it you myself, brother Ned, because the young gentleman is modest, and is a scholar, Ned, and I shouldn't feel it right that he should tell us his story over and over again as if he was a beggar, or as if we doubted him. No, no, no."

"No, no, no," returned the other, nodding his head gravely. "Very right, my dear brother, very right."

"He will tell me I'm wrong, if I make a mistake," said Nicholas's friend. "But whether I do or not, you'll be very much affected, brother Ned, remembering the time when we were two friendless lads, and earned our first shilling in this great city."

The twins pressed each other's hands in silence; and in his own homely manner, brother Charles related the particulars he had heard from Nicholas. The conversation which ensued, was a long one, and when it was over, a secret conference of almost equal duration took place between brother Ned and Tim Linkinwater in another room. It is no disparagement to Nicholas to say, that before he had been closeted with the two brothers ten minutes, he could only wave his hand at every fresh expression of kindness and sympathy, and sob like a little child.

At length brother Ned and Tim Linkinwater came back together, when Tim instantly walked up to Nicholas and whispered in his ear in a very brief sentence, (for Tim was ordinarily a man of few words,) that he had taken down the address in the Strand, and would call

upon him that evening, at eight. Having done which, Tim wiped his spectacles and put them on, preparatory to hearing what more the brothers Cheeryble had got to say.

"Tim," said brother Charles, "You understand that we have an intention of taking this young gentleman into the counting-house?"

Brother Ned remarked that Tim was aware of that intention, and quite approved of it; and Tim having nodded, and said he did, drew himself up and looked particularly fat, and very important. After which, there was a profound silence.

"I'm not coming an hour later in the morning you know," said Tim, breaking out all at once, and looking very resolute. "I'm not going to sleep in the fresh air — no, nor I'm not going into the country either. A pretty thing at this time of day, certainly. Pho!"

"Damn your obstinacy, Tim Linkinwater," said brother Charles, looking at him without the faintest spark of anger, and with a countenance radiant with attachment to the old clerk. "Damn your obstinacy, Tim Linkinwater, what do you mean, sir?"

"It's forty-four year," said Tim, making a calculation in the air with his pen, and drawing an imaginary line before he cast it up, "forty-four year, next May, since I first kept the books of Cheeryble, Brothers. I've opened the safe every morning all that time (Sundays excepted) as the clock struck nine, and gone over the house every night at half-past ten (except on Foreign Post nights, and then twenty minutes before twelve) to see the doors fastened, and the fires out. I've never slept out of the back attic one single night. There's the same mignonette box in the middle of the window, and the same four flower-pots, two on each side, that I brought with

me when I first came. There a'n't — I've said it again and again, and I'll maintain it — there a'n't such a square as this, in the world. I *know* there a'n't," said Tim, with sudden energy, and looking sternly about him. "Not one. For business or pleasure, in summer time or winter — I don't care which — there's nothing like it. There's not such a spring in England as the pump under the archway. There's not such a view in England as the view out of my window; I've seen it every morning before I shaved, and I ought to know something about it. I have slept in that room," added Tim, sinking his voice a little, "for four-and-forty year; and if it wasn't inconvenient, and didn't interfere with business, I should request leave to die there."

"Damn you, Tim Linkinwater, how dare you talk about dying?" roared the twins by one impulse, and blowing their old noses violently.

"That's what I've got to say, Mr. Edwin and Mr. Charles," said Tim, squaring his shoulders again. "This isn't the first time you've talked about superannuating me; but, if you please, we'll make it the last, and drop the subject for evermore."

With these words, Tim Linkinwater stalked out, and shut himself up in his glass case, with the air of a man who had had his say, and was thoroughly resolved not to be put down.

The brothers interchanged looks, and coughed some half-dozen times without speaking.

"He must be done something with, brother Ned," said the other, warmly; "we must disregard his old scruples; they can't be tolerated, or borne. He must be made a partner, brother Ned; and if he won't submit to it peaceably, we must have recourse to violence."

"Quite right," replied brother Ned, nodding his head as a man thoroughly determined; "quite right, my dear brother. If he won't listen to reason, we must do it against his will, and show him that we are determined to exert our authority. We must quarrel with him, brother Charles."

"We must — we certainly must have a quarrel with Tim Linkinwater," said the other. "But in the mean time, my dear brother, we are keeping our young friend; and the poor lady and her daughter will be anxious for his return. So let us say good-by for the present, and — there, there — take care of that box, my dear sir — and — no, no, no, not a word now; but be careful of the crossings and" ——

And with any disjointed and unconnected words which would prevent Nicholas from pouring forth his thanks, the brothers hurried him out: shaking hands with him all the way, and affecting very unsuccessfully — they were poor hands at deception! — to be wholly unconscious of the feelings that completely mastered him.

Nicholas's heart was too full to allow of his turning into the street until he had recovered some composure. When he at last glided out of the dark doorway-corner in which he had been compelled to halt, he caught a glimpse of the twins stealthily peeping in at one corner of the glass-case, evidently undecided whether they should follow up their late attack without delay, or for the present postpone laying further siege to the inflexible Tim Linkinwater.

To recount all the delight and wonder which the circumstances just detailed awakened at Miss La Creevy's, and all the things that were done, said, thought, expected, hoped, and prophesied in consequence, is beside

the present course and purpose of these adventures. It is sufficient to state, in brief, that Mr. Timothy Linkinwater arrived, punctual to his appointment; that, oddity as he was, and jealous as he was bound to be, of the proper exercise of his employers' most comprehensive liberality, he reported strongly and warmly in favor of Nicholas; and that, next day, he was appointed to the vacant stool in the counting-house of Cheeryble, Brothers, with a present salary of one hundred and twenty pounds a year.

"And I think, my dear brother," said Nicholas's first friend, "that if we were to let them that little cottage at Bow which is empty, at something under the usual rent, now — eh, brother Ned?"

"For nothing at all," said brother Ned. "We are rich, and should be ashamed to touch the rent under such circumstances as these. Where is Tim Linkinwater? — for nothing at all, my dear brother, for nothing at all."

"Perhaps it would be better to say something, brother Ned," suggested the other, mildly; "it would help to preserve habits of frugality, you know, and remove any painful sense of overwhelming obligations. We might say fifteen pound, or twenty pound, and if it was punctually paid, make it up to them in some other way. And I might secretly advance a small loan towards a little furniture, and you might secretly advance another small loan, brother Ned; and if we find them doing well — as we shall; there's no fear, no fear — we can change the loans into gifts — carefully, brother Ned, and by degrees, and without pressing upon them too much; what do you say now, brother?"

Brother Ned gave his hand upon it, and not only said

it should be done, but had it done too; and, in one short week, Nicholas took possession of the stool, and Mrs. Nickleby and Kate took possession of the house, and all was hope, bustle, and light-heartedness.

There surely never was such a week of discoveries and surprises as the first week of that cottage. Every night when Nicholas came home, something new had been found out. One day it was a grape-vine, and another day it was a boiler, and another day it was the key of the front parlor closet at the bottom of the water-butt, and so on through a hundred items. Then, this room was embellished with a muslin curtain, and that room was rendered quite elegant by a window-blind, and such improvements were made, as no one would have supposed possible. Then there was Miss La Creevy, who had come out in the omnibus to stop a day or two and help, and who was perpetually losing a very small brown paper parcel of tin tacks and a very large hammer, and running about with her sleeves tucked up at the wrists, and falling off pairs of steps and hurting herself very much — and Mrs. Nickleby, who talked incessantly, and did something now and then, but not often — and Kate, who busied herself noiselessly everywhere, and was pleased with everything — and Smike, who made the garden a perfect wonder to look upon — and Nicholas, who helped and encouraged them every one — all the peace and cheerfulness of home restored, with such new zest imparted to every frugal pleasure, and such delight to every hour of meeting, as misfortune and separation alone could give!

In short, the poor Nicklebys were social and happy; while the rich Nickleby was alone and miserable.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL ; RELATING TO FAMILY MATTERS. SHOWING HOW MR. KENWIGS UNDERWENT VIOLENT AGITATION, AND HOW MRS. KENWIGS WAS AS WELL AS COULD BE EXPECTED.

It might have been seven o'clock in the evening, and it was growing dark in the narrow streets near Golden Square, when Mr. Kenwigs sent out for a pair of the cheapest white kid gloves — those at fourteenpence — and selecting the strongest, which happened to be the right-hand one, walked down stairs, with an air of pomp and much excitement, and proceeded to muffle the knob of the street-door knocker therein. Having executed this task with great nicety, Mr. Kenwigs pulled the door to, after him, and just stepped across the road to try the effect from the opposite side of the street. Satisfied that nothing could possibly look better in its way, Mr. Kenwigs then stepped back again, and calling through the key-hole to Morleena to open the door, vanished into the house, and was seen no longer.

Now, considered as an abstract circumstance, there was no more obvious cause or reason why Mr. Kenwigs should take the trouble of muffling this particular knocker, than there would have been for his muffling the knocker of any nobleman or gentleman resident ten miles

off; because, for the greater convenience of the numerous lodgers, the street-door always stood wide open, and the knocker was never used at all. The first floor, the second floor, and the third floor, had each a bell of its own. As to the attics, no one ever called on them; if anybody wanted the parlors, they were close at hand, and all he had to do was to walk straight into them; while the kitchen had a separate entrance down the area steps. As a question of mere necessity and usefulness, therefore, this muffling of the knocker was thoroughly incomprehensible.

But knockers may be muffled for other purposes than those of mere utilitarianism, as, in the present instance, was clearly shown. There are certain polite forms and ceremonies which must be observed in civilized life, or mankind relapse into their original barbarism. No genteel lady was ever yet confined — indeed, no genteel confinement can possibly take place — without the accompanying symbol of a muffled knocker. Mrs. Kenwigs was a lady of some pretensions to gentility; Mrs. Kenwigs was confined. And, therefore, Mr. Kenwigs tied up the silent knocker on the premises in a white kid glove.

"I'm not quite certain neither," said Mr. Kenwigs, arranging his shirt-collar, and walking slowly up-stairs, "whether, as it's a boy, I won't have it in the papers."

Pondering upon the advisability of this step, and the sensation it was likely to create in the neighborhood, Mr. Kenwigs betook himself to the sitting-room, where various extremely diminutive articles of clothing were airing on a horse before the fire, and Mr. Lumbey, the doctor, was dandling the baby — that is, the old baby — not the new one.

"It's a fine boy, Mr. Kenwigs," said Mr. Lumbey, the doctor.

"You consider him a fine boy, do you, sir?" returned Mr. Kenwigs.

"It's the finest boy I ever saw in all my life," said the doctor. "I never saw such a baby."

It is a pleasant thing to reflect upon, and furnishes a complete answer to those who contend for the gradual degeneration of the human species, that every baby born into the world is a finer one than the last.

"I ne — ver saw such a baby," said Mr. Lumbey, the doctor.

"Morleena was a fine baby," remarked Mr. Kenwigs; as if this were an attack, by implication, upon the family.

"They were all fine babies," said Mr. Lumbey. And Mr. Lumbey went on nursing the baby with a thoughtful look. Whether he was considering under what head he could best charge the nursing in the bill, was best known to himself.

During this short conversation, Miss Morleena, as the eldest of the family, and natural representative of her mother during her indisposition, had been hustling and slapping the three younger Miss Kenwigses, without intermission; which considerate and affectionate conduct brought tears into the eyes of Mr. Kenwigs, and caused him to declare that, in understanding and behavior, that child was a woman.

"She will be a treasure to the man she marries, sir," said Mr. Kenwigs, half aside; "I think she'll marry above her station, Mr. Lumbey."

"I shouldn't wonder at all," replied the doctor.

"You never see her dance, sir, did you?" asked Mr. Kenwigs.

The doctor shook his head.

"Ay!" said Mr. Kenwigs, as though he pitied him from his heart, "then you don't know what she's capable of."

All this time, there had been a great whisking in and out of the other room; the door had been opened and shut very softly about twenty times a minute (for it was necessary to keep Mrs. Kenwigs quiet); and the baby had been exhibited to a score or two of deputations from a select body of female friends, who had assembled in the passage, and about the street-door, to discuss the event in all its bearings. Indeed, the excitement extended itself over the whole street, and groups of ladies might be seen standing at the doors, — some in the interesting condition in which Mrs. Kenwigs had last appeared in public, — relating their experiences of similar occurrences. Some few acquired great credit from having prophesied, the day before yesterday, exactly when it would come to pass; others, again, related, how that they guessed what it was, directly they saw Mr. Kenwigs turn pale and run up the street as hard as ever he could go. Some said one thing, and some another; but all talked together, and all agreed upon two points: first, that it was very meritorious and highly praiseworthy in Mrs. Kenwigs, to do as she had done: and secondly, that there never was such a skilful and scientific doctor as that Doctor Lumbey.

In the midst of this general hubbub, Doctor Lumbey sat in the first floor front, as before related, nursing the deposed baby, and talking to Mr. Kenwigs. He was a stout bluff-looking gentleman, with no shirt-collar, to speak of, and a beard that had been growing since yesterday morning; for Doctor Lumbey was popular,

and the neighborhood was prolific; and there had been no less than three other knockers muffled, one after the other, within the last forty-eight hours.

"Well, Mr. Kenwigs," said Dr. Lumbey, "this makes six. You'll have a fine family in time, sir."

"I think six is almost enough, sir," returned Mr. Kenwigs.

"Pooh! pooh!" said the doctor. "Nonsense! not half enough."

With this, the doctor laughed; but he didn't laugh half as much as a married friend of Mrs. Kenwigs's, who had just come in from the sick-chamber, to report progress, and take a small sip of brandy-and-water: and who seemed to consider it one of the best jokes ever launched upon society.

"They're not altogether dependent upon good fortune, neither," said Mr. Kenwigs, taking his second daughter on his knee; "they have expectations."

"Oh, indeed!" said Mr. Lumbey, the doctor.

"And very good ones too, I believe, haven't they?" asked the married lady.

"Why, ma'am," said Mr. Kenwigs, "it's not exactly for me to say what they may be, or what they may not be. It's not for me to boast of any family with which I have the honor to be connected; at the same time, Mrs. Kenwigs's is —— I should say," said Mr. Kenwigs, abruptly, and raising his voice as he spoke, "that my children might come into a matter of a hundred pound apiece, perhaps. Perhaps more, but certainly that."

"And a very pretty little fortune," said the married lady.

"There are some relations of Mrs. Kenwigs's," said Mr. Kenwigs, taking a pinch of snuff from the doctor's

box, and then sneezing very hard, for he wasn't used to it, "that might leave their hundred pound apiece to ten people, and yet not go begging when they had done it."

"Ah! I know who you mean," observed the married lady, nodding her head.

"I made mention of no names, and I wish to make mention of no names," said Mr. Kenwigs, with a portentous look. "Many of my friends have met a relation of Mrs. Kenwigs's in this very room, as would do honor to any company; that's all."

"I've met him," said the married lady, with a glance towards Doctor Lumbey.

"It's naterally very gratifying to my feelings as a father, to see such a man as that, a-kissing and taking notice of my children," pursued Mr. Kenwigs. "It's naterally very gratifying to my feelings as a man, to know that man. It will be naterally very gratifying to my feelings as a husband, to make that man acquainted with this ewent."

Having delivered his sentiments in this form of words, Mr. Kenwigs arranged his second daughter's flaxen tail, and bade her be a good girl and mind what her sister, Morleena, said.

"That girl grows more like her mother every day," said Mr. Lumbey, suddenly stricken with an enthusiastic admiration of Morleena.

"There!" rejoined the married lady. "What I always say — what I always did say! She's the very picter of her." Having thus directed the general attention to the young lady in question, the married lady embraced the opportunity of taking another sip of the brandy-and-water — and a pretty long sip too.

"Yes! there is a likeness," said Mr. Kenwigs, after

some reflection. "But such a woman as Mrs. Kenwigs was, afore she was married! Good gracious, such a woman!"

Mr. Lumbey shook his head with great solemnity, as though to imply that he supposed she must have been rather a dazzler.

"Talk of fairies!" cried Mr. Kenwigs. "*I* never see anybody so light to be alive — never. Such manners too; so playful, and yet so sewerely proper! As for her figure! It isn't generally known," said Mr. Kenwigs, dropping his voice; but her figure was such, at that time, that the sign of the Britannia over in the Holloway road, was painted from it!"

"But only see what it is now," urged the married lady. "Does *she* look like the mother of six?"

"Quite ridiculous," cried the doctor.

"She looks a deal more like her own daughter," said the married lady.

"So she does," assented Mr. Lumbey. "A great deal more."

Mr. Kenwigs was about to make some further observations, most probably in confirmation of this opinion, when another married lady, who had looked in to keep up Mrs. Kenwigs's spirits, and help to clear off anything in the eating and drinking way that might be going about, put in her head to announce that she had just been down to answer the bell, and that there was a gentleman at the door who wanted to see Mr. Kenwigs "most particular."

Shadowy visions of his distinguished relation flitted through the brain of Mr. Kenwigs, as this message was delivered; and under their influence, he despatched Morleena to show the gentleman up straightway.

"Why, I do declare," said Mr. Kenwigs, standing opposite the door so as to get the earliest glimpse of the visitor, as he came up-stairs, "it's Mr. Johnson! How do you find yourself, sir?"

Nicholas shook hands, kissed his old pupils all round, intrusted a large parcel of toys to the guardianship of Morleena, bowed to the doctor and the married ladies, and inquired after Mrs. Kenwigs in a tone of interest, which went to the very heart and soul of the nurse, who had come in to warm some mysterious compound, in a little saucepan over the fire.

"I ought to make a hundred apologies to you for calling at such a season," said Nicholas, "but I was not aware of it until I had rung the bell, and my time is so fully occupied now, that I feared it might be some days before I could possibly come again."

"No time like the present, sir," said Mr. Kenwigs. "The sitiwation of Mrs. Kenwigs, sir, is no obstacle to a little conversation between you and me, I hope?"

"You are very good," said Nicholas.

At this juncture, proclamation was made by another married lady, that the baby had begun to eat like anything; whereupon the two married ladies, already mentioned, rushed tumultuously into the bedroom to behold him in the act.

"The fact is," resumed Nicholas, "that before I left the country, where I have been for some time past, I undertook to deliver a message to you."

"Aye, aye?" said Mr. Kenwigs.

"And I have been," added Nicholas, "already in town some days, without having had an opportunity of doing so."

"It's no matter, sir," said Mr. Kenwigs. "I dare say

it's none the worse for keeping cold. Message from the country!" said Mr. Kenwigs, ruminating; "that's curious. I don't know anybody in the country."

"Miss Petowker," suggested Nicholas.

"Oh! from her, is it?" said Mr. Kenwigs. "Oh dear, yes. Ah! Mrs. Kenwigs will be glad to hear from her. Henrietta Petowker, eh? How odd things come about, now! That you should have met her in the country — Well!"

Hearing this mention of their old friend's name, the four Miss Kenwigses gathered round Nicholas, open-eyed and mouthed, to hear more. Mr. Kenwigs looked a little curious too, but quite comfortable and unsuspecting.

"The message relates to family matters," said Nicholas, hesitating.

"Oh, never mind," said Kenwigs, glancing at Mr. Lumbey, who having rashly taken charge of little Lillyvick, found nobody disposed to relieve him of his precious burden. "All friends here."

Nicholas hemmed once or twice, and seemed to have some difficulty in proceeding.

"At Portsmouth, Henrietta Petowker is," observed Mr. Kenwigs.

"Yes," said Nicholas, "Mr. Lillyvick is there."

Mr. Kenwigs turned pale, but he recovered, and said, *that* was an odd coincidence also.

"The message is from him," said Nicholas.

Mr. Kenwigs appeared to revive. He knew that his niece was in a delicate state, and had, no doubt, sent word that they were to forward full particulars: — Yes. That was very kind of him — so like him too!

"He desired me to give his kindest love," said Nicholas.

"Very much obliged to him, I'm sure. Your great-uncle, Lillyvick, my dears!" interposed Mr. Kenwigs, condescendingly explaining it to the children.

"His kindest love," resumed Nicholas; "and to say that he had no time to write, but that he was married to Miss Petowker."

Mr. Kenwigs started from his seat with a petrified stare, caught his second daughter by her flaxen tail, and covered his face with his pocket-handkerchief. Morleena fell, all stiff and rigid, into the baby's chair, as she had seen her mother fall when she fainted away, and the two remaining little Kenwigses shrieked in affright.

"My children, my defrauded, swindled infants!" cried Mr. Kenwigs, pulling so hard, in his vehemence, at the flaxen tail of his second daughter, that he lifted her up on tiptoe, and kept her, for some seconds, in that attitude. "Villain, ass, traitor!"

"Drat the man!" cried the nurse, looking angrily round. "What does he mean by making that noise here?"

"Silence, woman!" said Mr. Kenwigs, fiercely.

"I won't be silent," returned the nurse. "Be silent yourself, you wretch. Have you no regard for your baby?"

"No!" returned Mr. Kenwigs.

"More shame for you," retorted the nurse. "Ugh! you unnatural monster."

"Let him die," cried Mr. Kenwigs, in the torrent of his wrath. "Let him die! He has no expectations, no property to come into. We want no babies here," said Mr. Kenwigs recklessly. "Take 'em away, take 'em away to the Fondling!"

With these awful remarks, Mr. Kenwigs sat himself

down in a chair, and defied the nurse, who made the best of her way into the adjoining room, and returned with a stream of matrons: declaring that Mr. Kenwigs had spoken blasphemy against his family, and must be raving mad.

Appearances were certainly not in Mr. Kenwigs's favor, for the exertion of speaking with so much vehemence, and yet in such a tone as should prevent his lamentations reaching the ears of Mrs. Kenwigs, had made him very black in the face; besides which, the excitement of the occasion, and an unwonted indulgence in various strong cordials to celebrate it, had swollen and dilated his features to a most unusual extent. But, Nicholas and the doctor — who had been passive at first, doubting very much whether Mr. Kenwigs could be in earnest — interfering to explain the immediate cause of his condition, the indignation of the matrons was changed to pity, and they implored him, with much feeling, to go quietly to bed.

"The attention," said Mr. Kenwigs, looking around with a plaintive air, "the attention that I've shown to that man! The hyseters he has eat, and the pints of ale he has drank, in this house!" —

"It's very trying, and very hard to bear, we know," said one of the married ladies; "but think of your dear darling wife."

"Oh yes, and what she's been a-undergoing of, only this day," cried a great many voices. "There's a good man, do."

"The presents that have been made to him," said Mr. Kenwigs, reverting to his calamity, "the pipes, the snuff-boxes — a pair of india-rubber goloshes, that cost six and six" —

"Ah! it won't bear thinking of, indeed," cried the matrons generally; "but it'll all come home to him, never fear."

Mr. Kenwigs looked darkly upon the ladies, as if he would prefer its all coming home to *him*, as there was nothing to be got by it; but he said nothing, and resting his head upon his hand, subsided into a kind of doze.

Then, the matrons again expatiated on the expediency of taking the good gentleman to bed; observing that he would be better to-morrow, and that they knew what was the wear and tear of some men's minds when their wives were taken as Mrs. Kenwigs had been that day, and that it did him great credit, and there was nothing to be ashamed of in it; far from it; they liked to see it, they did, for it showed a good heart. And one lady observed, as a case bearing upon the present, that her husband was often quite light-headed from anxiety on similar occasions, and that once, when her little Johnny was born, it was nearly a week before he came to himself again, during the whole of which time he did nothing but cry "Is it a boy, is it a boy?" in a manner which went to the hearts of all his hearers.

At length, Morleena (who quite forgot she had fainted, when she found she was not noticed) announced that a chamber was ready for her afflicted parent; and Mr. Kenwigs, having partially smothered his four daughters in the closeness of his embrace, accepted the doctor's arm on one side, and the support of Nicholas on the other, and was conducted up-stairs to a bedroom, which had been secured for the occasion.

Having seen him sound asleep, and heard him snore most satisfactorily, and having further presided over the

distribution of the toys, to the perfect contentment of all the little Kenwigses, Nicholas took his leave. The matrons dropped off, one by one, with the exception of six or eight particular friends, who had determined to stop all night; the lights in the houses gradually disappeared; the last bulletin was issued that Mrs. Kenwigs was as well as could be expected; and the whole family were left to their repose.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

NICHOLAS FINDS FURTHER FAVOR IN THE EYES OF THE BROTHERS CHEERYBLE AND MR. TIMOTHY LINKINWATER. THE BROTHERS GIVE A BANQUET ON A GREAT ANNUAL OCCASION. NICHOLAS, ON RETURNING HOME FROM IT, RECEIVES A MYSTERIOUS AND IMPORTANT DISCLOSURE FROM THE LIPS OF MRS. NICKLEBY.

The Square in which the counting-house of the brothers Cheeryble was situated, although it might not wholly realize the very sanguine expectations which a stranger would be disposed to form on hearing the fervent encomiums bestowed upon it by Tim Linkinwater, was, nevertheless, a sufficiently desirable nook in the heart of a busy town like London, and one which occupied a high place in the affectionate remembrances of several grave persons domiciled in the neighborhood, whose recollections, however, dated from a much more recent period, and whose attachment to the spot was far less absorbing, than were the recollections and attachment of the enthusiastic Tim.

And let not those whose eyes have been accustomed to the aristocratic gravity of Grosvenor Square and Hanover Square, the dowager barrenness and frigidity of Fitzroy Square, or the gravel walks and garden seats

of the Squares of Russell and Euston, suppose that the affections of Tim Linkinwater, or the inferior lovers of this particular locality, had been awakened and kept alive by any refreshing associations with leaves, however dingy, or grass, however bare and thin. The City square has no enclosure, save the lamp-post in the middle: and no grass but the weeds which spring up round its base. It is a quiet, little-frequented, retired spot, favorable to melancholy and contemplation, and appointments of long-waiting; and up and down its every side the Appointed saunters idly by the hour together wakening the echoes with the monotonous sound of his footsteps on the smooth worn stones, and counting, first the windows, and then the very bricks of the tall silent houses that hem him round about. In winter-time, the snow will linger there, long after it has melted from the busy streets and highways. The summer's sun holds it in some respect, and while he darts his cheerful rays sparingly into the square, keeps his fiery heat and glare for noisier and less-imposing precincts. It is so quiet, that you can almost hear the ticking of your own watch when you stop to cool in its refreshing atmosphere. There is a distant hum — of coaches, not of insects — but no other sound disturbs the stillness of the square. The ticket-porter leans idly against the post at the corner: comfortably warm, but not hot, although the day is broiling. His white apron flaps languidly in the air, his head gradually droops upon his breast, he takes very long winks with both eyes at once; even he, is unable to withstand the soporific influence of the place, and is gradually falling asleep. But now, he starts into full wakefulness, recoils a step or two, and gazes out before him with eager wildness in his eye. Is it a job, or a

boy at marbles? Does he see a ghost, or hear an organ? No; sight more unwonted still — there is a butterfly in the square — a real, live butterfly! astray from flowers and sweets, and fluttering among the iron heads of the dusty area railings.

But if there were not many matters immediately without the doors of Cheeryble Brothers, to engage the attention or distract the thoughts of the young clerk, there were not a few within, to interest and amuse him. There was scarcely an object in the place, animate or inanimate, which did not partake in some degree of the scrupulous method and punctuality of Mr. Timothy Linkinwater. Punctual as the counting-house dial, which he maintained to be the best time-keeper in London next after the clock of some old, hidden, unknown church hard by, (for Tim held the fabled goodness of that at the Horse Guards to be a pleasant fiction, invented by jealous West-enders,) the old clerk performed the minutest actions of the day, and arranged the minutest articles in the little room, in a precise and regular order, which could not have been exceeded if it had actually been a real glass case, fitted with the choicest curiosities. Paper, pens, ink, ruler, sealing-wax, wafers, pouncet-box, string-box, fire-box, Tim's hat, Tim's scrupulously-folded gloves, Tim's other coat — looking precisely like a back view of himself as it hung against the wall — all had their accustomed inches of space. Except the clock, there was not such an accurate and unimpeachable instrument in existence, as the little thermometer which hung behind the door. There was not a bird of such methodical and business-like habits in all the world, as the blind blackbird, who dreamed and dozed away his days in a large snug cage, and had lost his voice, from old age, years

before Tim first bought him. There was not such an eventful story in the whole range of anecdote, as Tim could tell concerning the acquisition of that very bird; how, compassionating his starved and suffering condition, he had purchased him, with the view of humanely terminating his wretched life; how, he determined to wait three days and see whether the bird revived; how, before half the time was out, the bird did revive; and how he went on reviving and picking up his appetite and good looks until he gradually became what — "what you see him now, sir" — Tim would say, glancing proudly at the cage. And with that, Tim would utter a melodious chirrup, and cry "Dick;" and Dick, who, for any sign of life he had previously given, might have been a wooden or stuffed representation of a blackbird indifferently executed, would come to the side of the cage in three small jumps, and, thrusting his bill between the bars, turn his sightless head towards his old master — and at that moment it would be very difficult to determine which of the two was the happier, the bird or Tim Linkinwater.

Nor was this all. Everything gave back, besides, some reflection of the kindly spirit of the brothers. The warehousemen and porters were such sturdy, jolly fellows, that it was a treat to see them. Among the shipping-announcements and steam-packet lists which decorated the counting-house wall, were designs for almshouses, statements of charities, and plans for new hospitals. A blunderbuss and two swords hung above the chimney-piece, for the terror of evil-doers, but the blunderbuss was rusty and shattered, and the swords were broken and edgeless. Elsewhere, their open display in such a condition would have raised a smile;

but, there, it seemed as though even violent and offensive weapons partook of the reigning influence, and became emblems of mercy and forbearance.

Such thoughts as these, occurred to Nicholas very strongly, on the morning when he first took possession of the vacant stool, and looked about him, more freely and at ease, than he had before enjoyed an opportunity of doing. Perhaps they encouraged and stimulated him to exertion, for, during the next two weeks, all his spare hours, late at night and early in the morning, were incessantly devoted to acquiring the mysteries of book-keeping and some other forms of mercantile account. To these, he applied himself with such steadiness and perseverance that, although he brought no greater amount of previous knowledge to the subject than certain dim recollections of two or three very long sums entered into a ciphering-book at school, and relieved for parental inspection by the effigy of a fat swan tastefully flourished by the writing-master's own hand, he found himself, at the end of a fortnight, in a condition to report his proficiency to Mr. Linkinwater, and to claim his promise that he, Nicholas Nickleby, should now be allowed to assist him in his graver labors.

It was a sight to behold Tim Linkinwater slowly bring out a massive ledger and day-book, and, after turning them over and over, and affectionately dusting their backs and sides, open the leaves here and there, and cast his eyes, half-mournfully, half-proudly, upon the fair and unblotted entries.

"Four-and-forty year, next May!" said Tim. "Many new ledgers since then. Four-and-forty year!"

Tim closed the book again.

"Come, come," said Nicholas, "I am all impatience to begin."

Tim Linkinwater shook his head with an air of mild reproof. Mr. Nickleby was not sufficiently impressed with the deep and awful nature of his undertaking. Suppose there should be any mistake — any scratching out! —

Young men are adventurous. It is extraordinary what they will rush upon, sometimes. Without even taking the precaution of sitting himself down upon his stool, but standing leisurely at the desk, and with a smile upon his face — actually a smile; (there was no mistake about it; Mr. Linkinwater often mentioned it afterwards;) — Nicholas dipped his pen into the inkstand before him, and plunged into the books of Cheeryble Brothers!

Tim Linkinwater turned pale, and tilting up his stool on the two legs nearest Nicholas, looked over his shoulder in breathless anxiety. Brother Charles and brother Ned entered the counting-house together; but Tim Linkinwater, without looking round, impatiently waved his hand as a caution that profound silence must be observed, and followed the nib of the inexperienced pen with strained and eager eyes.

The brothers looked on with smiling faces, but Tim Linkinwater smiled not, nor moved for some minutes. At length, he drew a long slow breath, and still maintaining his position on the tilted stool, glanced at brother Charles, secretly pointed with the feather of his pen towards Nicholas, and nodded his head in a grave and resolute manner, plainly signifying "He'll do."

Brother Charles nodded again, and exchanged a laughing look with brother Ned; but, just then, Nicholas

stopped to refer to some other page, and Tim Linkinwater, unable to contain his satisfaction any longer, descended from his stool, and caught him rapturously by the hand.

"He has done it!" said Tim, looking round at his employers and shaking his head triumphantly. "His capital B's and D's are exactly like mine; he dots all his small i's and crosses every t as he writes it. There a'n't such a young man as this in all London," said Tim, clapping Nicholas on the back; "not one. Don't tell me! The City can't produce his equal. I challenge the City to do it!"

With this casting down of his gauntlet, Tim Linkinwater struck the desk such a blow with his clenched fist, that the old blackbird tumbled off his perch with the start it gave him, and actually uttered a feeble croak, in the extremity of his astonishment.

"Well said, Tim — well said, Tim Linkinwater!" cried Brother Charles, scarcely less pleased than Tim himself, and clapping his hands gently as he spoke, "I knew our young friend would take great pains, and I was quite certain he would succeed, in no time. Didn't I say so, brother Ned?"

"You did, my dear brother — certainly, my dear brother, you said so, and you were quite right," replied Ned. "Quite right. Tim Linkinwater is excited, but he is justly excited, properly excited. Tim is a fine fellow. Tim Linkinwater, sir — you're a fine fellow."

"Here's a pleasant thing to think of!" said Tim, wholly regardless of this address to himself, and raising his spectacles from the ledger to the brothers. "Here's a pleasant thing. Do you suppose I haven't often thought what would become of these books when I was

gone? Do you suppose I haven't often thought that things might go on irregular and untidy here, after I was taken away? But now," said Tim, extending his forefinger towards Nicholas, "now, when I've shown him a little more, I'm satisfied. The business will go on, when I'm dead, as well as it did when I was alive — just the same; and I shall have the satisfaction of knowing that there never were such books — never were such books! No, nor never will be such books — as the books of Cheeryble Brothers."

Having thus expressed his sentiments, Mr. Linkinwater gave vent to a short laugh, indicative of defiance to the cities of London and Westminster, and, turning again to his desk, quietly carried seventy-six from the last column he had added up, and went on with his work.

"Tim Linkinwater, sir," said brother Charles; "give me your hand, sir. This is your birthday. How dare you talk about anything else till you have been wished many happy returns of the day, Tim Linkinwater? God bless you, Tim! God bless you!"

"My dear brother," said the other, seizing Tim's disengaged fist, "Tim Linkinwater looks ten years younger than he did on his last birthday."

"Brother Ned, my dear boy," returned the other old fellow, "I believe that Tim Linkinwater was born a hundred-and-fifty years old, and is gradually coming down to five-and-twenty; for he's younger every birthday than he was the year before."

"So he is, brother Charles, so he is," replied brother Ned. "There's not a doubt about it."

"Remember, Tim," said brother Charles, "that we dine at half-past five to-day instead of two o'clock; we

always depart from our usual custom on this anniversary, as you very well know, Tim Linkinwater. Mr. Nickleby, my dear sir, you will make one. Tim Linkinwater, give me your snuff-box as a remembrance to brother Charles and myself of an attached and faithful rascal, and take that, in exchange, as a feeble mark of our respect and esteem, and don't open it until you go to bed, and never say another word upon the subject, or I'll kill the blackbird. A dog! He should have had a golden cage half-a-dozen years ago, if it would have made him or his master a bit the happier. Now, brother Ned, my dear fellow, I'm ready. At half-past five, remember, Mr. Nickleby! Tim Linkinwater, sir, take care of Mr. Nickleby at half-past five. Now, brother Ned."

Chattering away thus, according to custom, to prevent the possibility of any thanks or acknowledgment being expressed on the other side, the twins trotted off, arm in arm: having endowed Tim Linkinwater with a costly gold snuff-box, enclosing a bank-note worth more than its value ten times told.

At a quarter past five o'clock, punctual to the minute, arrived, according to annual usage, Tim Linkinwater's sister; and a great to-do there was, between Tim Linkinwater's sister and the old housekeeper, respecting Tim Linkinwater's sister's cap, which had been despatched, per boy, from the house of the family where Tim Linkinwater's sister boarded, and had not yet come to hand: notwithstanding that it had been packed up in a bandbox, and the bandbox in a handkerchief, and the handkerchief tied on to the boy's arm: and notwithstanding, too, that the place of its consignment had been duly set forth, at full length, on the back of an old letter, and the boy enjoined, under pain of divers horrible penalties, the

full extent of which the eye of man could not foresee, to deliver the same with all possible speed, and not to loiter by the way. Tim Linkinwater's sister lamented; the housekeeper condoled; and both kept thrusting their heads out of the second-floor window to see if the boy was "coming," — which would have been highly satisfactory, and, upon the whole, tantamount to his being come, as the distance to the corner was not quite five yards — when, all of a sudden, and when he was least expected, the messenger, carrying the bandbox with elaborate caution, appeared in an exactly opposite direction, puffing and panting for breath, and flushed with recent exercise; as well he might be; for he had taken the air, in the first instance, behind a hackney-coach that went to Camberwell, and had followed two Punches afterwards, and had seen the Stilts home to their own door. The cap was all safe, however — that was one comfort — and it was no use scolding him — that was another; so the boy went upon his way rejoicing, and Tim Linkinwater's sister presented herself to the company below stairs, just five minutes after the half-hour had struck by Tim Linkinwater's own infallible clock.

The company consisted of the brothers Cheeryble, Tim Linkinwater, a ruddy-faced white-headed friend of Tim's, (who was a superannuated bank-clerk,) and Nicholas, who was presented to Tim Linkinwater's sister with much gravity and solemnity. The party being now completed, brother Ned rang for dinner, and, dinner being shortly afterwards announced, led Tim Linkinwater's sister into the next room where it was set forth with great preparation. Then, brother Ned took the head of the table, and brother Charles the foot; and Tim Linkinwater's sister sat on the left hand of brother

Ned, and Tim Linkinwater himself on his right: and an ancient butler of apoplectic appearance, and with very short legs, took up his position at the back of brother Ned's arm-chair, and, waving his right arm preparatory to taking off the covers with a flourish, stood bolt upright and motionless.

"For these and all other blessings, brother Charles," said Ned.

"Lord, make us truly thankful, brother Ned," said Charles.

Whereupon the apoplectic butler whisked off the top of the soup-tureen, and shot, all at once, into a state of violent activity.

There was abundance of conversation, and little fear of its ever flagging, for the good-humor of the glorious old twins drew everybody out, and Tim Linkinwater's sister went off into a long and circumstantial account of Tim Linkinwater's infancy, immediately after the very first glass of champagne — taking care to premise that she was very much Tim's junior, and had only become acquainted with the facts from their being preserved and handed down in the family. This history concluded, brother Ned related how that, exactly thirty-five years ago, Tim Linkinwater was suspected to have received a love-letter, and how that vague information had been brought to the counting-house of his having been seen walking down Cheapside with an uncommonly handsome spinster; at which there was a roar of laughter, and Tim Linkinwater being charged with blushing, and called upon to explain, denied that the accusation was true; and further, that there would have been any harm in it if it had been; which last position occasioned the superannuated bank-clerk to laugh tremendously, and to

declare that it was the very best thing he had ever heard in his life, and that Tim Linkinwater might say a great many things before he said anything which would beat *that.*

There was one little ceremony peculiar to the day, both the matter and manner of which made a very strong impression upon Nicholas. The cloth having been removed and the decanters sent round for the first time, a profound silence succeeded, and in the cheerful faces of the brothers there appeared an expression, not of absolute melancholy, but of quiet thoughtfulness very unusual at a festive table. As Nicholas, struck by this sudden alteration, was wondering what it could portend, the brothers rose together, and the one at the top of the table leaning forward towards the other, and speaking in a low voice as if he were addressing him individually, said:

"Brother Charles, my dear fellow, there is another association connected with this day which must never be forgotten, and never can be forgotten, by you and me. This day, which brought into the world a most faithful and excellent and exemplary fellow, took from it, the kindest and very best of parents — the very best of parents to us both. I wish that she could have seen us in our prosperity, and shared it, and had the happiness of knowing how dearly we loved her in it, as we did when we were two poor boys — but that was not to be. My dear brother — The Memory of our Mother."

"Good God!" thought Nicholas, "and there are scores of people of their own station, knowing all this, and twenty thousand times more, who wouldn't ask these men to dinner because they eat with their knives and never went to school!"

But there was no time to moralize, for the joviality again became very brisk, and the decanter of port being nearly out, brother Ned pulled the bell, which was instantly answered by the apoplectic butler.

"David," said brother Ned.

"Sir," replied the butler.

"A magnum of the double-diamond, David, to drink the health of Mr. Linkinwater."

Instantly, by a feat of dexterity, which was the admiration of all the company, and had been, annually, for some years past, the apoplectic butler, bringing his left hand from behind the small of his back, produced the bottle with the corkscrew already inserted; uncorked it at a jerk; and placed the magnum and the cork before his master with the dignity of conscious cleverness.

"Ha!" said brother Ned, first examining the cork and afterwards filling his glass, while the old butler looked complacently and amiably on, as if it were all his own property, but the company were quite welcome to make free with it, "this looks well, David."

"It ought to, sir," replied David. "You'd be troubled to find such a glass of wine as is our double-diamond, and that Mr. Linkinwater knows very well. That was laid down, when Mr. Linkinwater first come: that wine was, gentlemen."

"Nay, David, nay," interposed brother Charles.

"I wrote the entry in the cellar-book myself, sir, *if* you please," said David, in the tone of a man, quite confident in the strength of his facts. "Mr. Linkinwater had only been here twenty year, sir, when that pipe of double-diamond was laid down."

"David is quite right — quite right, brother Charles," said Ned: "are the people here, David?"

"Outside the door, sir," replied the butler.

"Show 'em in, David, show 'em in."

At this bidding, the old butler placed before his master a small tray of clean glasses, and opening the door admitted the jolly porters and warehousemen whom Nicholas had seen below. They were four in all, and as they came in, bowing, and grinning, and blushing, the housekeeper, and cook, and house-maid, brought up the rear.

"Seven," said brother Ned, filling a corresponding number of glasses with the double-diamond, "and David, eight — There! Now, you're all of you to drink the health of your best friend Mr. Timothy Linkinwater, and wish him health and long life and many happy returns of this day, both for his own sake and that of your old masters, who consider him an inestimable treasure. Tim Linkinwater, sir, your health. Devil take you, Tim Linkinwater, sir, God bless you."

With this singular contradiction of terms, brother Ned gave Tim Linkinwater a slap on the back, which made him look, for the moment, almost as apoplectic as the butler: and tossed off the contents of his glass in a twinkling.

The toast was scarcely drunk with all honor to Tim Linkinwater, when the sturdiest and jolliest subordinate elbowed himself a little in advance of his fellows, and exhibiting a very hot and flushed countenance, pulled a single lock of gray hair in the middle of his forehead as a respectful salute to the company, and delivered himself as follows — rubbing the palms of his hands very hard on a blue cotton handkerchief as he did so:

"We're allowed to take a liberty once a year, gen'lemen, and if you please we'll take it now; there being

no time like the present, and no two birds in the hand worth one in the bush, as is well known — leastways in a contrairy sense, which the meaning is the same. (A pause — the butler unconvinced.) What we mean to say is, that there never was (looking at the butler)— such —(looking at the cook) noble — excellent —(looking everywhere and seeing nobody) free, generous spirited masters as them as has treated us so handsome this day. And here's thanking of 'em for all their goodness as is so constancy a-diffusing of itself over everywhere, and wishing they may live long and die happy!"

When the foregoing speech was over — and it might have been much more elegant and much less to the purpose — the whole body of subordinates under command of the apoplectic butler gave three soft cheers; which, to that gentleman's great indignation, were not very regular, inasmuch as the women persisted in giving an immense number of little shrill hurrahs among themselves, in utter disregard of the time. This done, they withdrew; shortly afterwards, Tim Linkinwater's sister withdrew; in reasonable time after that, the sitting was broken up for tea and coffee, and a round game of cards.

At half-past ten — late hours for the square — there appeared a little tray of sandwiches and a bowl of bishop, which bishop coming on the top of the double-diamond, and other excitements, had such an effect upon Tim Linkinwater, that he drew Nicholas aside, and gave him to understand, confidentially, that it was quite true about the uncommonly handsome spinster, and that she was to the full as good-looking as she had been described — more so, indeed — but that she was in too much of a hurry to change her condition, and consequently, while

Tim was courting her and thinking of changing his, got married to somebody else. "After all, I dare say it was my fault," said Tim. "I'll show you a print I have got up-stairs, one of these days. It cost me five-and-twenty shillings. I bought it, soon after we were cool to each other. Don't mention it, but it's the most extraordinary accidental likeness you ever saw — her very portrait, sir!"

By this time it was past eleven o'clock; and Tim Linkinwater's sister declaring that she ought to have been at home a full hour ago, a coach was procured, into which she was handed with great ceremony by brother Ned, while brother Charles imparted the fullest directions to the coachman, and, besides paying the man a shilling over and above his fare, in order that he might take the utmost care of the lady, all but choked him with a glass of spirits of uncommon strength, and then nearly knocked all the breath out of his body in his energetic endeavors to knock it in again.

At length the coach rumbled off, and Tim Linkinwater's sister being now fairly on her way home, Nicholas and Tim Linkinwater's friend took their leaves together, and left old Tim and the worthy brothers to their repose.

As Nicholas had some distance to walk, it was considerably past midnight by the time he reached home, where he found his mother and Smike sitting up to receive him. It was long after their usual hour of retiring, and they had expected him, at the very latest, two hours ago; but the time had not hung heavily on their hands, for Mrs. Nickleby had entertained Smike with a genealogical account of her family by the mother's side, comprising biographical sketches of the principal mem-

bers, and Smike had sat wondering what it was all about, and whether it was learnt from a book, or said out of Mrs. Nickleby's own head; so that they got on together very pleasantly.

Nicholas could not go to bed without expatiating on the excellences and munificence of the Brothers Cheeryble, and relating the great success which had attended his efforts that day. But before he had said a dozen words, Mrs. Nickleby, with many sly winks and nods, observed, that she was sure Mr. Smike must be quite tired out, and that she positively must insist on his not sitting up a minute longer.

"A most biddable creature he is, to be sure," said Mrs. Nickleby, when Smike had wished them good-night and left the room. "I know you'll excuse me, Nicholas, my dear, but I don't like to do this before a third person; indeed, before a young man it would not be quite proper, though really, after all, I don't know what harm there is in it, except that to be sure it's not a very becoming thing, though some people say it is very much so, and really I don't know why it should not be, if it's well got up, and the borders are small-plaited; of course, a good deal depends upon that."

With which preface, Mrs. Nickleby took her nightcap from between the leaves of a very large prayer-book where it had been folded up small, and proceeded to tie it on: talking away, in her usual discursive manner, all the time.

"People may say what they like," observed Mrs. Nickleby, "but there's a great deal of comfort in a nightcap, as I'm sure you would confess, Nicholas my dear, if you would only have strings to yours, and wear it like a Christian, instead of sticking it upon the very top of

your head like a blue-coat boy. You needn't think it an unmanly or quizzical thing to be particular about your nightcap, for I have often heard your poor dear papa, and the reverend Mr. what's his name, who used to read prayers in that old church with the curious little steeple that the weathercock was blown off the night week before you were born, — I have often heard them say, that the young men at college are uncommonly particular about their nightcaps, and that the Oxford nightcaps are quite celebrated for their strength and goodness; so much so, indeed, that the young men never dream of going to bed without 'em, and I believe it's admitted on all hands that *they* know what's good, and don't coddle themselves."

Nicholas laughed, and entering no further into the subject of this lengthened harangue, reverted to the pleasant tone of the little birthday party. And as Mrs. Nickleby instantly became very curious respecting it, and made a great number of inquiries touching what they had had for dinner, and how it was put on table, and whether it was overdone or underdone, and who was there, and what "the Mr. Cherrybles" said, and what Nicholas said, and what the Mr. Cherrybles said when he said that; Nicholas described the festivities at full length, and also the occurrences of the morning.

"Late as it is," said Nicholas, "I am almost selfish enough to wish that Kate had been up; to hear all this. I was all impatience, as I came along, to tell her."

"Why, Kate," said Mrs. Nickleby, putting her feet upon the fender, and drawing her chair close to it, as if settling herself for a long talk. "Kate has been in bed — oh! a couple of hours — and I'm very glad,

Nicholas, my dear, that I prevailed upon her not to sit up, for I wished very much to have an opportunity of saying a few words to you. I am naturally anxious about it, and of course it's a very delightful and consoling thing to have a grown-up son that one can put confidence in, and advise with — indeed I don't know any use there would be in having sons at all, unless people could put confidence in them."

Nicholas stopped in the middle of a sleepy yawn, as his mother began to speak: and looked at her with fixed attention.

"There was a lady in our neighborhood," said Mrs. Nickleby, "speaking of sons puts me in mind of it — a lady in our neighborhood when we lived near Dawlish, I think her name was Rogers; indeed I am sure it was if it wasn't Murphy, which is the only doubt I have" —

"Is it about her, mother, that you wished to speak to me?" said Nicholas quietly.

"About *her!*" cried Mrs. Nickleby. "Good gracious, Nicholas, my dear, how *can* you be so ridiculous! But that was always the way with your poor dear papa, — just his way, always wandering, never able to fix his thoughts on any one subject for two minutes together. I think I see him now!" said Mrs. Nickleby, wiping her eyes, "looking at me while I was talking to him about his affairs, just as if his ideas were in a state of perfect conglomeration! Anybody who had come in upon us suddenly, would have supposed I was confusing and distracting him instead of making things plainer; upon my word they would."

"I am very sorry, mother, that I should inherit this unfortunate slowness of apprehension," said Nicholas,

kindly; "but I'll do my best to understand you, if you'll only go straight on: indeed I will."

"Your poor papa!" said Mrs. Nickleby, pondering. "He never knew, till it was too late, what I would have had him do!"

This was undoubtedly the case, inasmuch as the deceased Mr. Nickleby had not arrived at the knowledge when he died. Neither had Mrs. Nickleby herself; which is, in some sort, an explanation of the circumstance.

"However," said Mrs. Nickleby, drying her tears, "this has nothing to do — certainly, nothing whatever to do — with the gentleman in the next house."

"I should suppose that the gentleman in the next house has as little to do with us," returned Nicholas.

"There can be no doubt," said Mrs. Nickleby, "that he *is* a gentleman, and has the manners of a gentleman, and the appearance of a gentleman, although he does wear smalls and gray worsted stockings. That may be eccentricity, or he may be proud of his legs. I don't see why he shouldn't be. The Prince Regent was proud of his legs, and so was Daniel Lambert, who was also a fat man; *he* was proud of his legs. So was Miss Biffin: she was — no," added Mrs. Nickleby, correcting herself, "I think she had only toes, but the principle is the same."

Nicholas looked on, quite amazed at the introduction of this new theme. Which seemed just what Mrs. Nickleby had expected him to be.

"You may well be surprised, Nicholas, my dear," she said, "I am sure *I* was. It came upon me like a flash of fire, and almost froze my blood. The bottom of his garden joins the bottom of ours, and of course I had

several times seen him sitting among the scarlet-beans in his little arbor, or working at his little hot-beds. I used to think he stared rather, but I didn't take any particular notice of that, as we were new-comers, and he might be curious to see what we were like. But when he began to throw his cucumbers over our wall" —

"To throw his cucumbers over our wall!" repeated Nicholas, in great astonishment.

"Yes, Nicholas, my dear," replied Mrs. Nickleby in a very serious tone; "his cucumbers over our wall. And vegetable-marrows likewise."

"Confound his impudence!" said Nicholas, firing immediately. "What does he mean by that?"

"I don't think he means it impertinently at all," replied Mrs. Nickleby.

"What!" said Nicholas, "cucumbers and vegetable-marrows flying at the heads of the family as they walk in their own garden, and not meant impertinently! Why, mother" —

Nicholas stopped short; for there was an indescribable expression of placid triumph, mingled with a modest confusion, lingering between the borders of Mrs. Nickleby's nightcap, which arrested his attention suddenly.

"He must be a very weak, and foolish, and inconsiderate man," said Mrs. Nickleby; "blamable indeed — at least I suppose other people would consider him so; of course I can't be expected to express any opinion on that point, especially after always defending your poor dear papa when other people blamed him for making proposals to me; and to be sure there can be no doubt that he has taken a very singular way of showing it. Still at the same time, his attentions are — that is, as far as it goes, and to a certain extent of course — a flat-

tering sort of thing; and although I should never dream of marrying again with a dear girl like Kate still unsettled in life" —

"Surely, mother, such an idea never entered your brain for an instant?" said Nicholas.

"Bless my heart, Nicholas, my dear," returned his mother in a peevish tone, "isn't that precisely what I am saying, if you would only let me speak? Of course, I never gave it a second thought, and I am surprised and astonished that you should suppose me capable of such a thing. All I say is, what step is the best to take, so as to reject these advances civilly and delicately, and without hurting his feelings too much, and driving him to despair, or anything of that kind? My goodness me!" exclaimed Mrs. Nickleby, with a half simper, "suppose he was to go doing anything rash to himself. Could I ever be happy again, Nicholas?"

Despite his vexation and concern, Nicholas could scarcely help smiling, as he rejoined, "Now, do you think, mother, that such a result would be likely to ensue from the most cruel repulse?"

"Upon my word, my dear, I don't know," returned Mrs. Nickleby; "really, I don't know. I am sure there was a case in the day before yesterday's paper, extracted from one of the French newspapers, about a journeyman shoemaker who was jealous of a young girl in an adjoining village, because she wouldn't shut herself up in an air-tight three-pair-of-stairs, and charcoal herself to death with him; and who went and hid himself in a Wood with a sharp-pointed knife, and rushed out, as she was passing by with a few friends, and killed himself first, and then all the friends, and then her — no, killed all the friends first, and then herself, and then *him*self

— which it is quite frightful to think of. Somehow or other," added Mrs. Nickleby, after a momentary pause, "they always *are* journeymen shoemakers who do these things in France, according to the papers. I don't know how it is — something in the leather, I suppose."

"But this man, who is not a shoemaker — what has he done, mother, what has he said?" inquired Nicholas, fretted almost beyond endurance, but looking nearly as resigned and patient as Mrs. Nickleby herself. "You know, there is no language of vegetables, which converts a cucumber into a formal declaration of attachment."

"My dear," replied Mrs. Nickleby, tossing her head and looking at the ashes in the grate, "he has done and said all sorts of things."

"Is there no mistake on your part?" asked Nicholas.

"Mistake!" cried Mrs. Nickleby. "Lord, Nicholas my dear, do you suppose I don't know when a man's in earnest?"

"Well, well!" muttered Nicholas.

"Every time I go to the window," said Mrs. Nickleby, "he kisses one hand, and lays the other upon his heart — of course it's very foolish of him to do so, and I dare say you'll say it's very wrong, but he does it very respectfully—very respectfully indeed—and very tenderly, extremely tenderly. So far, he deserves the greatest credit; there can be no doubt about that. Then, there are the presents which come pouring over the wall every day, and very fine they certainly are, very fine; we had one of the cucumbers at dinner yesterday, and think of pickling the rest for next winter. And last evening," added Mrs. Nickleby, with increased confusion, "he called gently over the wall, as I was walking in the garden, and proposed marriage, and an elopement. His

voice is as clear as a bell or a musical glass — very like a musical glass indeed — but of course I didn't listen to it. Then, the question is, Nicholas my dear, what am I to do?"

"Does Kate know of this?" asked Nicholas.

"I have not said a word about it yet," answered his mother.

"Then, for Heaven's sake," rejoined Nicholas, rising, "do not, for it would make her very unhappy. And with regard to what you should do, my dear mother, do what your good sense and feeling, and respect for my father's memory, would prompt. There are a thousand ways in which you can show your dislike of these preposterous and doting attentions. If you act as decidedly as you ought and they are still continued, and to your annoyance, I can speedily put a stop to them. But I should not interfere in a matter so ridiculous, and attach importance to it, until you have vindicated yourself. Most women can do that, but especially one of your age and condition, in circumstances like these, which are unworthy of a serious thought. I would not shame you by seeming to take them to heart, or treat them earnestly for an instant. Absurd old idiot!"

So saying, Nicholas kissed his mother, and bade her good night, and they retired to their respective chambers.

To do Mrs. Nickleby justice, her attachment to her children would have prevented her seriously contemplating a second marriage, even if she could have so far conquered her recollections of her late husband as to have any strong inclinations that way. But, although there was no evil and little real selfishness in Mrs. Nickleby's heart, she had a weak head and a vain one; and

there was something so flattering in being sought (and vainly sought) in marriage at this time of day, that she could not dismiss the passion of the unknown gentleman, quite so summarily or lightly, as Nicholas appeared to deem becoming.

"As to its being preposterous, and doting, and ridiculous," thought Mrs. Nickleby, communing with herself in her own room, "I don't see that, at all. It's hopeless on his part, certainly; but why he should be an absurd old idiot, I confess I don't see. He is not to be supposed to know it's hopeless. Poor fellow! He is to be pitied, *I* think!"

Having made these reflections, Mrs. Nickleby looked in her little dressing-glass, and, walking backward a few steps from it, tried to remember who it was who used to say that when Nicholas was one-and-twenty he would have more the appearance of her brother, than her son. Not being able to call the authority to mind, she extinguished her candle, and drew up the window-blind to admit the light of morning, which had, by this time, begun to dawn.

"It's a bad light to distinguish objects in," murmured Mrs. Nickleby, peering into the garden, "and my eyes are not very good — I was short-sighted from a child — but, upon my word, I think there's another large vegetable-marrow sticking, at this moment, on the broken glass bottles at the top of the wall!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

COMPRISES CERTAIN PARTICULARS ARISING OUT OF A VISIT OF CONDOLENCE, WHICH MAY PROVE IMPORTANT HEREAFTER. SMIKE UNEXPECTEDLY ENCOUNTERS A VERY OLD FRIEND, WHO INVITES HIM TO HIS HOUSE, AND WILL TAKE NO DENIAL.

QUITE unconscious of the demonstrations of their amorous neighbor, or their effects upon the susceptible bosom of her mamma, Kate Nickleby had, by this time, begun to enjoy a settled feeling of tranquillity and happiness, to which, even in occasional and transitory glimpses, she had long been a stranger. Living under the same roof with the beloved brother from whom she had been so suddenly and hardly separated: with a mind at ease, and free from any persecutions which could call a blush into her cheek, or a pang into her heart: she seemed to have passed into a new state of being. Her former cheerfulness was restored, her step regained its elasticity and lightness, the color which had forsaken her cheek visited it once again, and Kate Nickleby looked more beautiful than ever.

Such was the result to which Miss La Creevy's ruminations and observations led her, when the cottage had been, as she emphatically said, "thoroughly got to rights, from the chimney-pots to the street-door scraper,"

and the busy little woman had at length a moment's time to think about its inmates.

"Which I declare I haven't had since I first came down here," said Miss La Creevy; "for I have thought of nothing but hammers, nails, screw-drivers, and gimlets, morning, noon, and night."

"You never bestow one thought upon yourself, I believe," returned Kate, smiling.

"Upon my word, my dear, when there are so many pleasanter things to think of, I should be a goose if I did," said Miss La Creevy. "By the by, I *have* thought of somebody too. Do you know, that I observe a great change in one of this family — a very extraordinary change?"

"In whom?" asked Kate, anxiously. "Not in" —

"Not in your brother, my dear," returned Miss La Creevy, anticipating the close of the sentence, "for he is always the same affectionate good-natured clever creature, with a spice of the — I won't say who — in him when there's any occasion, that he was when I first knew you. No. Smike, as he *will* be called, poor fellow! for he won't hear of a *Mr.* before his name, is greatly altered, even in this short time."

"How?" asked Kate. "Not in health?"

"N-n-o; perhaps not in health exactly," said Miss La Creevy, pausing to consider, "although he is a worn and feeble creature, and has that in his face which it would wring my heart to see in yours. No; not in health."

"How then?"

"I scarcely know," said the miniature-painter. "But I have watched him, and he has brought the tears into my eyes many times. It is not a very difficult matter

to do that, certainly, for I am easily melted; still I think these came with good cause and reason. I am sure that since he has been here, he has grown, from some strong cause, more conscious of his weak intellect. He feels it more. It gives him greater pain to know that he wanders sometimes, and cannot understand very simple things. I have watched him when you have not been by, my dear, sit brooding by himself, with such a look of pain as I could scarcely bear to see, and then get up and leave the room: so sorrowfully, and in such dejection, that I cannot tell you how it has hurt me. Not three weeks ago, he was a light-hearted busy creature, overjoyed to be in a bustle, and as happy as the day was long. Now, he is another being — the same willing, harmless, faithful, loving creature — but the same in nothing else."

"Surely this will all pass off," said Kate. "Poor fellow!"

"I hope," returned her little friend, with a gravity very unusual in her, "it may. I hope, for the sake of that poor lad, it may. However," said Miss La Creevy, relapsing into the cheerful, chattering tone, which was habitual to her, "I have said my say, and a very long say it is, and a very wrong say too, I shouldn't wonder at all. I shall cheer him up to-night, at all events, for if he is to be my squire all the way to the Strand, I shall talk on, and on, and on, and never leave off, till I have roused him into a laugh at something. So the sooner he goes, the better for him, and the sooner I go, the better for me, I am sure, or else I shall have my maid gallivanting with somebody who may rob the house — though what there is to take away, besides tables and chairs, I don't know, except

the miniatures: and he is a clever thief who can dispose of them to any great advantage, for *I* can't, I know, and that's the honest truth."

So saying, little Miss La Creevy hid her face in a very flat bonnet, and herself in a very big shawl; and fixing herself tightly into the latter, by means of a large pin, declared that the omnibus might come as soon as it pleased, for she was quite ready.

But there was still Mrs. Nickleby to take leave of; and long before that good lady had concluded some reminiscences, bearing upon, and appropriate to, the occasion, the omnibus arrived. This put Miss La Creevy in a great bustle, in consequence whereof, as she secretly rewarded the servant-girl with eighteen-pence behind the street-door, she pulled out of her reticule ten-pennyworth of half-pence, which rolled into all possible corners of the passage, and occupied some considerable time in the picking up. This ceremony, had, of course, to be succeeded by a second kissing of Kate and Mrs. Nickleby, and a gathering together of the little basket and the brown-paper parcel, during which proceedings, "the omnibus," as Miss La Creevy protested, "swore so dreadfully, that it was quite awful to hear it." At length and at last, it made a feint of going away, and then Miss La Creevy darted out, and darted in, apologizing with great volubility to all the passengers, and declaring that she wouldn't purposely have kept them waiting on any account whatever. While she was looking about for a convenient seat, the conductor pushed Smike in, and cried that it was all right — though it wasn't — and away went the huge vehicle, with the noise of half a dozen brewers' drays at least.

Leaving it to pursue its journey at the pleasure of the

conductor aforementioned, who lounged gracefully on his little shelf behind, smoking an odoriferous cigar; and leaving it to stop, or go on, or gallop, or crawl, as that gentleman deemed expedient and advisable; this narrative may embrace the opportunity of ascertaining the condition of Sir Mulberry Hawk, and to what extent he had, by this time, recovered from the injuries consequent on being flung violently from his cabriolet, under the circumstances already detailed.

With a shattered limb, a body severely bruised, a face disfigured by half-healed scars, and pallid from the exhaustion of recent pain and fever, Sir Mulberry Hawk lay stretched upon his back, on the couch to which he was doomed to be a prisoner for some weeks yet to come. Mr. Pyke and Mr. Pluck sat drinking hard in the next room, now and then varying the monotonous murmurs of their conversation with a half-smothered laugh, while the young lord — the only member of the party who was not thoroughly irredeemable, and who really had a kind heart — sat beside his Mentor, with a cigar in his mouth, and read to him, by the light of a lamp, such scraps of intelligence from a paper of the day, as were most likely to yield him interest or amusement.

"Curse those hounds!" said the invalid, turning his head impatiently towards the adjoining room; "will nothing stop their infernal throats?"

Messrs. Pyke and Pluck heard the exclamation, and stopped immediately: winking to each other as they did so, and filling their glasses to the brim, as some recompense for the deprivation of speech.

"Damn!" muttered the sick man between his teeth, and writhing impatiently in his bed. "Isn't this mattress hard enough, and the room dull enough, and pain

bad enough, but *they* must torture me? What's the time?"

"Half past eight," replied his friend.

"Here, draw the table nearer, and let us have the cards again," said Sir Mulberry. "More piquet. Come."

It was curious to see how eagerly the sick man, debarred from any change of position save the mere turning of his head from side to side, watched every motion of his friend in the progress of the game; and with what eagerness and interest he played, and yet how warily and coolly. His address and skill were more than twenty times a match for his adversary, who could make little head against them, even when fortune favored him with good cards, which was not often the case. Sir Mulberry won every game; and when his companion threw down the cards, and refused to play any longer, thrust forth his wasted arm and caught up the stakes with a boastful oath, and the same hoarse laugh, though considerably lowered in tone, that had resounded in Ralph Nickleby's dining-room, months before.

While he was thus occupied, his man appeared, to announce that Mr. Ralph Nickleby was below, and wished to know how he was, to-night.

"Better," said Sir Mulberry, impatiently.

"Mr. Nickleby wishes to know, sir" ——

"I tell you, better," replied Sir Mulberry, striking his hand upon the table.

The man hesitated for a moment or two, and then said that Mr. Nickleby had requested permission to see Sir Mulberry Hawk, if it was not inconvenient.

"It *is* inconvenient. I can't see him. I can't see

anybody," said his master, more violently than before. "You know that, you blockhead."

"I am very sorry, sir," returned the man. "But Mr. Nickleby pressed so much, sir" ——

The fact was, that Ralph Nickleby had bribed the man, who, being anxious to earn his money with a view to future favors, held the door in his hand, and ventured to linger still.

"Did he say whether he had any business to speak about?" inquired Sir Mulberry, after a little impatient consideration.

"No, sir. He said he wished to see you, sir. Particularly, Mr. Nickleby said, sir."

"Tell him to come up. Here," cried Sir Mulberry, calling the man back, as he passed his hand over his disfigured face, "move that lamp, and put it on the stand behind me. Wheel that table away, and place a chair there — farther off. Leave it so."

The man obeyed these directions as if he quite comprehended the motive with which they were dictated, and left the room. Lord Frederick Verisopht, remarking that he would look in presently, strolled into the adjoining apartment, and closed the folding-door behind him.

Then was heard a subdued footstep on the stairs; and Ralph Nickleby, hat in hand, crept softly into the room, with his body bent forward as if in profound respect, and his eyes fixed upon the face of his worthy client.

"Well, Nickleby," said Sir Mulberry, motioning him to the chair by the couch side, and waving his hand in assumed carelessness, "I have had a bad accident, you see."

"I see," rejoined Ralph, with the same steady gaze.

"Bad, indeed! I should not have known you, Sir Mulberry. Dear, dear! This *is* bad."

Ralph's manner was one of profound humility and respect; and the low tone of voice was that, which the gentlest consideration for a sick man would have taught a visitor to assume. But the expression of his face, Sir Mulberry's being averted, was in extraordinary contrast; and as he stood, in his usual attitude, calmly looking on the prostrate form before him, all that part of his features which was not cast into shadow by his protruding and contracted brows, bore the impress of a sarcastic smile.

"Sit down," said Sir Mulberry, turning towards him, as though by a violent effort. "Am I a sight, that you stand gazing there?"

As he turned his face, Ralph recoiled a step or two, and making as though he were irresistibly impelled to express astonishment, but was determined not to do so, sat down with well-acted confusion.

"I have inquired at the door, Sir Mulberry, every day," said Ralph, "twice a day, indeed, at first — and to-night, presuming upon old acquaintance, and past transactions by which we have mutually benefited in some degree, I could not resist soliciting admission to your chamber. Have you — have you suffered much?" said Ralph, bending forward, and allowing the same harsh smile to gather upon his face, as the other closed his eyes.

"More than enough to please me, and less than enough to please some broken-down hacks that you and I know of, and who lay their ruin between us, I dare say," returned Sir Mulberry, tossing his arm restlessly upon the coverlet.

Ralph shrugged his shoulders in deprecation of the intense irritation with which this had been said; for there was an aggravating, cold distinctness in his speech and manner which so grated on the sick man that he could scarcely endure it.

"And what is it in these 'past transactions,' that brought you here to-night?" asked Sir Mulberry.

"Nothing," replied Ralph. "There are some bills of my lord's which need renewal; but let them be, till you are well. I — I — came," said Ralph, speaking more slowly, and with harsher emphasis, "I came to say how grieved I am that any relative of mine, although disowned by me, should have inflicted such punishment on you as" ——

"Punishment!" interposed Sir Mulberry.

"I know it has been a severe one," said Ralph, wilfully mistaking the meaning of the interruption, "and that has made me the more anxious to tell you that I disown this vagabond — that I acknowledge him as no kin of mine — and that I leave him to take his deserts from you, and every man besides. You may wring his neck if you please. *I* shall not interfere."

"This story that they tell me here, has got abroad then, has it?" asked Sir Mulberry, clenching his hands and teeth.

"Noised in all directions," replied Ralph. "Every club and gaming-room has rung with it. There has been a good song made about it, as I am told," said Ralph, looking eagerly at his questioner. "I have not heard it myself, not being in the way of such things, but I have been told it's even printed — for private circulation — but that's all over town, of course."

"It's a lie!" said Sir Mulberry; "I tell you it's all a lie. The mare took fright."

"They *say* he frightened her," observed Ralph, in the same unmoved and quiet manner. "Some say he frightened you, but *that's* a lie, I know. I have said that boldly — oh, a score of times! I am a peaceable man, but I can't hear folks tell that of you — No, no."

When Sir Mulberry found coherent words to utter, Ralph bent forward with his hand to his ear, and a face as calm as if its every line of sternness had been cast in iron.

"When I am off this cursed bed," said the invalid, actually striking at his broken leg in the ecstasy of his passion, "I'll have such revenge as never man had yet. By G— I will! Accident favoring him, he has marked me for a week or two, but I'll put a mark on him that he shall carry to his grave. I'll slit his nose and ears — flog him — maim him for life. I'll do more than that; I'll drag that pattern of chastity, that pink of prudery, the delicate sister, through" ——

It might have been that even Ralph's cold blood tingled in his cheeks at that moment. It might have been that Sir Mulberry remembered, that, knave and usurer as he was, he must, in some early time of infancy, have twined his arm about her father's neck. He stopped, and, menacing with his hand, confirmed the unuttered threat with a tremendous oath.

"It is a galling thing," said Ralph, after a short term of silence, during which he had eyed the sufferer keenly, "to think that the man about town, the rake, the *roué*, the rook of twenty seasons should be brought to this pass by a mere boy!"

Sir Mulberry darted a wrathful look at him, but Ralph's eyes were bent upon the ground, and his face wore no other expression than one of thoughtfulness.

"A raw, slight stripling," continued Ralph, "against a man whose very weight might crush him; to say nothing of his skill in — I am right, I think," said Ralph, raising his eyes, "you *were* a patron of the ring once, were you not?"

The sick man made an impatient gesture, which Ralph chose to consider as one of acquiescence.

"Ha!" he said, "I thought so. That was before I knew you, but I was pretty sure I couldn't be mistaken. He is light and active, I suppose. But those were slight advantages compared with yours. Luck, luck — these hangdog outcasts have it."

"He'll need the most he has, when I am well again," said Sir Mulberry Hawk, "let him fly where he will."

"Oh!" returned Ralph quickly, "he doesn't dream of that. He is here, good sir, waiting your pleasure — here in London, walking the streets at noonday; carrying it off jauntily; looking for you, I swear," said Ralph, his face darkening, and his own hatred getting the upper hand of him, for the first time, as this gay picture of Nicholas presented itself; "if we were only citizens of a country where it could be safely done, I'd give good money to have him stabbed to the heart and rolled into the kennel for the dogs to tear."

As Ralph, somewhat to the surprise of his old client, vented this little piece of sound family feeling, and took up his hat preparatory to departing, Lord Frederick Verisopht looked in.

"Why what in the deyvle's name, Hawk, have you and Nickleby been talking about?" said the young man. "I neyver heard such an insufferable riot. Croak, croak, croak. Bow, wow, wow. What has it all been about?"

"Sir Mulberry has been angry, my Lord," said Ralph, looking towards the couch.

"Not about money, I hope? Nothing has gone wrong in business, has it, Nickleby?"

"No, my Lord, no," returned Ralph. "On that point we always agree. Sir Mulberry has been calling to mind the cause of"——

There was neither necessity nor opportunity for Ralph to proceed; for Sir Mulberry took up the theme, and vented his threats and oaths against Nicholas, almost as ferociously as before.

Ralph, who was no common observer, was surprised to see that as this tirade proceeded, the manner of Lord Frederick Verisopht, who at the commencement had been twirling his whiskers with a most dandified and listless air, underwent a complete alteration. He was still more surprised when, Sir Mulberry ceasing to speak, the young lord angrily, and almost unaffectedly, requested never to have the subject renewed in his presence.

"Mind that, Hawk!" he added, with unusual energy, "I never will be a party to, or permit, if I can help it, a cowardly attack upon this young fellow."

"Cowardly!" interrupted his friend.

"Ye-es," said the other, turning full upon him. "If you had told him who you were; if you had given him your card, and found out, afterwards, that his station or character prevented your fighting him, it would have been bad enough then; upon my soul it would have been bad enough then. As it is, you did wrong. I did wrong too, not to interfere, and I am sorry for it. What happened to you afterwards, was as much the consequence of accident as design, and more your fault than

his; and it shall not, with my knowledge, be cruelly visited upon him — it shall not indeed."

With this emphatic repetition of his concluding words, the young lord turned upon his heel; but before he had reached the adjoining room he turned back again, and said, with even greater vehemence than he had displayed before,

"I do believe, now; upon my honor I do believe, that the sister is as virtuous and modest a young lady as she is a handsome one; and of the brother, I say this, that he acted as her brother should, and in a manly and spirited manner. And I only wish, with all my heart and soul, that any one of us came out of this matter half as well as he does."

So saying, Lord Frederick Verisopht walked out of the room, leaving Ralph Nickleby and Sir Mulberry in most unpleasant astonishment.

"Is this your pupil?" asked Ralph, softly, "or has he come fresh from some country parson?"

"Green fools take these fits sometimes," replied Sir Mulberry Hawk, biting his lip, and pointing to the door. "Leave him to me."

Ralph exchanged a familiar look with his old acquaintance; for they had suddenly grown confidential again in this alarming surprise; and took his way home, thoughtfully and slowly.

While these things were being said and done, and long before they were concluded, the omnibus had disgorged Miss La Creevy and her escort, and they had arrived at her own door. Now, the good-nature of the little miniature-painter would by no means allow of Smike's walking back again, until he had been previously refreshed with just a sip of something comfort-

able and a mixed biscuit or so; and Smike, entertaining no objection either to the sip of something comfortable or the mixed biscuit, but, considering on the contrary that they would be a very pleasant preparation for a walk to Bow, it fell out that he delayed much longer than he originally intended, and that it was some half hour after dusk when he set forth on his journey home.

There was no likelihood of his losing his way, for it lay quite straight before him, and he had walked into town with Nicholas, and back alone, almost every day. So, Miss La Creevy and he shook hands with mutual confidence, and, being charged with more kind remembrances to Mrs. and Miss Nickleby, Smike started off.

At the foot of Ludgate Hill, he turned a little out of the road to satisfy his curiosity by having a look at Newgate. After staring up at the sombre walls, from the opposite side of the way, with great care and dread for some minutes, he turned back again into the old track, and walked briskly through the city; stopping now and then to gaze in at the window of some particularly attractive shop, then running for a little way, then stopping again, and so on, as any other country lad might do.

He had been gazing for a long time through a jeweller's window, wishing he could take some of the beautiful trinkets home as a present, and imagining what delight they would afford if he could, when the clock struck three-quarters past eight; roused by the sound, he hurried on at a very quick pace, and was crossing the corner of a by-street when he felt himself violently brought to, with a jerk so sudden that he was obliged to cling to a lamp-post to save himself from falling. At the same moment, a small boy clung tight round his leg,

and a shrill cry of "Here he is, father, — Hooray!" vibrated in his ears.

Smike knew that voice too well. He cast his despairing eyes downward towards the form from which it had proceeded, and, shuddering from head to foot, looked round. Mr. Squeers had hooked him in the coat-collar with the handle of his umbrella, and was hanging on at the other end with all his might and main. The cry of triumph proceeded from Master Wackford, who, regardless of all his kicks and struggles, clung to him with the tenacity of a bull-dog!

One glance showed him this; and in that one glance the terrified creature became utterly powerless and unable to utter a sound.

"Here's a go!" cried Mr. Squeers, gradually coming hand-over-hand down the umbrella, and only unhooking it when he had got tight hold of the victim's collar. "Here's a delicious go! Wackford, my boy, call up one of them coaches."

"A coach, father!" cried little Wackford.

"Yes, a coach, sir," replied Squeers, feasting his eyes upon the countenance of Smike. "Damn the expense. Let's have him in a coach."

"What's he been a-doing of?" asked a laborer, with a hod of bricks, against whom and a fellow-laborer Mr. Squeers had backed, on the first jerk of the umbrella.

"Everything!" replied Mr. Squeers, looking fixedly at his old pupil in a sort of rapturous trance. "Everything — running away, sir — joining in blood-thirsty attacks upon his master — there's nothing that's bad that he hasn't done. Oh, what a delicious go is this here, good Lord!"

The man looked from Squeers to Smike; but such

mental faculties as the poor fellow possessed, had utterly deserted him. The coach came up; Master Wackford entered; Squeers pushed in his prize, and following close at his heels, pulled up the glasses. The coachman mounted his box and drove slowly off, leaving the two bricklayers, and an old apple-woman, and a town-made little boy returning from an evening school, who had been the only witnesses of the scene, to meditate upon it at their leisure.

Mr. Squeers sat himself down on the opposite seat to the unfortunate Smike, and, planting his hands firmly on his knees, looked at him for some five minutes, when, seeming to recover from his trance, he uttered a loud laugh, and slapped his old pupil's face several times — taking the right and left sides alternately.

"It isn't a dream!" said Squeers. "That's real flesh and blood! I know the feel of it!" and being quite assured of his good fortune by these experiments, Mr. Squeers administered a few boxes on the ear, lest the entertainment should seem to partake of sameness, and laughed louder and longer at every one.

"Your mother will be fit to jump out of her skin, my boy, when she hears of this," said Squeers to his son.

"Oh, won't she though, father?" replied Master Wackford.

"To think," — said Squeers, "that you and me should be turning out of a street, and come upon him at the very nick; and that I should have him tight, at only one cast of the umbrella, as if I had hooked him with a grappling-iron! — Ha, ha!"

"Didn't I catch hold of his leg, neither, father?" said little Wackford.

"You did; like a good 'un, my boy," said Mr. Squeers,

patting his son's head, "and you shall have the best button-over jacket and waistcoat that the next new boy brings down, as a reward of merit — mind that. You always keep on in the same path, and do them things that you see your father do, and when you die you'll go right slap to heaven and no questions asked."

Improving the occasion in these words, Mr. Squeers patted his son's head again, and then patted Smike's — but harder; and inquired in a bantering tone how he found himself by this time.

"I must go home," replied Smike, looking wildly round.

"To be sure you must. You're about right there," replied Mr. Squeers. "You'll go home very soon, you will. You'll find yourself at the peaceful village of Dotheboys, in Yorkshire, in something under a week's time, my young friend; and the next time you get away from there, I give you leave to keep away. Where's the clothes you run off in, you ungrateful robber?" said Mr. Squeers, in a severe voice.

Smike glanced at the neat attire which the care of Nicholas had provided for him, and wrung his hands.

"Do you know that I could hang you up, outside of the Old Bailey, for making away with them articles of property?" said Squeers. "Do you know that it's a hanging matter — and I a'n't quite certain whether it a'n't an anatomy one besides — to walk off with up'ards of the valley of five pound from a dwelling-house? Eh — do you know that? What do you suppose was the worth of them clothes you had? Do you know that that Wellington-boot you wore, cost eight-and-twenty shillings when it was a pair, and the shoe seven-and-six? But you came to the right shop for mercy when you came to

me, and thank your stars that it *is* me as has got to serve you with the article."

Anybody not in Mr. Squeers's confidence, would have supposed that he was quite out of the article in question, instead of having a large stock on hand ready for all comers; nor would the opinion of sceptical persons have undergone much alteration when he followed up the remark by poking Smike in the chest with the ferrule of his umbrella, and dealing a smart shower of blows, with the ribs of the same instrument, upon his head and shoulders.

"I never threshed a boy in a hackney-coach before," said Mr. Squeers, when he stopped to rest. "There's inconveniency in it, but the novelty gives it a sort of relish, too!"

Poor Smike! He warded off the blows, as well as he could, and now shrunk into a corner of the coach, with his head resting on his hands, and his elbows on his knees; he was stunned and stupefied, and had no more idea that any act of his, would enable him to escape from the all-powerful Squeers, now that he had no friend to speak to or to advise with, than he had had in all the weary years of his Yorkshire life which preceded the arrival of Nicholas.

The journey seemed endless; street after street was entered and left behind; and still they went jolting on. At last Mr. Squeers began to thrust his head out of the window every half-minute, and to bawl a variety of directions to the coachman; and after passing, with some difficulty, through several mean streets which the appearance of the houses and the bad state of the road denoted to have been recently built, Mr. Squeers suddenly tugged at the check-string with all his might, and cried, "Stop!"

"What are you pulling a man's arm off for?" said the coachman, looking angrily down.

"That's the house," replied Squeers. "The second of them four little houses, one story high, with the green shutters — there's a brass plate on the door, with the name of Snawley."

"Couldn't you say that without wrenching a man's limbs off his body?" inquired the coachman.

"No!" bawled Mr. Squeers. "Say another word, and I'll summons you for having a broken winder. Stop!"

Obedient to this direction, the coach stopped at Mr. Snawley's door. Mr. Snawley may be remembered as the sleek and sanctified gentleman who confided two sons (*in law*) to the parental care of Mr. Squeers, as narrated in the fourth chapter of this history. Mr. Snawley's house was on the extreme borders of some new settlements adjoining Somers Town, and Mr. Squeers had taken lodgings therein, for a short time, as his stay was longer than usual, and the Saracen, having experience of Master Wackford's appetite, had declined to receive him on any other terms than as a full-grown customer.

"Here we are!" said Squeers, hurrying Smike into the little parlor, where Mr. Snawley and his wife were taking a lobster supper. "Here's the vagrant — the felon — the rebel — the monster of unthankfulness."

"What! The boy that run away!" cried Snawley, resting his knife and fork upright on the table, and opening his eyes to their full width.

"The very boy," said Squeers, putting his fist close to Smike's nose, and drawing it away again, and repeating the process several times, with a vicious aspect. "If there wasn't a lady present, I'd fetch him such a —— never mind, I'll owe it him."

And here Mr. Squeers related how, and in what manner, and when and where, he had picked up the runaway.

"It's clear that there has been a Providence in it, sir," said Mr. Snawley, casting down his eyes with an air of humility, and elevating his fork, with a bit of lobster on the top of it, towards the ceiling.

"Providence is against him, no doubt," replied Mr. Squeers, scratching his nose. "Of course; that was to be expected. Anybody might have known that."

"Hard-heartedness and evil-doing will never prosper, sir," said Mr. Snawley.

"Never was such a thing known," rejoined Squeers, taking a little roll of notes from his pocket-book, to see that they were all safe.

"I have been, Mrs. Snawley," said Mr. Squeers, when he had satisfied himself upon this point, "I have been that chap's benefactor, feeder, teacher, and clother. I have been that chap's classical, commercial, mathematical, philosophical, and trigonomical friend. My son — my only son, Wackford — has been his brother; Mrs. Squeers has been his mother, grandmother, aunt, — Ah! and I may say uncle too, all in one. She never cottoned to anybody, except them two engaging and delightful boys of yours, as she cottoned to this chap. What's my return? What's come of my milk of human kindness? It turns into curds and whey when I look at him."

"Well it may, sir," said Mrs. Snawley. "Oh! Well it may, sir."

"Where has he been all this time?" inquired Snawley. "Has he been living with?" ——

"Ah, sir!" interposed Squeers, confronting him again. "Have you been a-living with that there devilish Nickleby, sir?"

But no threats or cuffs could elicit from Smike one word of reply to this question; for he had internally resolved that he would rather perish in the wretched prison to which he was again about to be consigned, than utter one syllable which could involve his first and true friend. He had already called to mind the strict injunctions of secrecy as to his past life, which Nicholas had laid upon him when they travelled from Yorkshire; and a confused and perplexed idea that his benefactor might have committed some terrible crime in bringing him away, which would render him liable to heavy punishment if detected, had contributed, in some degree, to reduce him to his present state of apathy and terror.

Such were the thoughts — if to visions so imperfect and undefined as those which wandered through his enfeebled brain, the term can be applied — which were present to the mind of Smike, and rendered him deaf alike to intimidation and persuasion. Finding every effort useless, Mr. Squeers conducted him to a little back room up-stairs, where he was to pass the night; and, taking the precaution of removing his shoes, and coat and waistcoat, and also of locking the door on the outside, lest he should muster up sufficient energy to make an attempt at escape that worthy gentleman left him to his meditations.

What those meditations were, and how the poor creature's heart sunk within him when he thought — when did he, for a moment, cease to think! — of his late home, and the dear friends and familiar faces with which it was associated, cannot be told. To prepare the mind for such a heavy sleep, its growth must be stopped by rigor and cruelty in childhood; there must be years of misery and suffering lightened by no ray of hope; the chords of the

heart, which beat a quick response to the voice of gentleness and affection, must have rusted and broken in their secret places, and bear the lingering echo of no old word of love or kindness. Gloomy, indeed, must have been the short day, and dull the long, long twilight, preceding such a night of intellect as his.

There were voices which would have roused him, even then ; but their welcome tones could not penetrate there ; and he crept to bed the same listless, hopeless, blighted creature, that Nicholas had first found him at the Yorkshire school.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

IN WHICH ANOTHER OLD FRIEND ENCOUNTERS SMIKE, VERY OPPORTUNELY AND TO SOME PURPOSE.

THE night, fraught with so much bitterness to one poor soul, had given place to a bright and cloudless summer morning, when a north-country mail-coach traversed, with cheerful noise, the yet silent streets of Islington, and, giving brisk note of its approach with the lively winding of the guard's horn, clattered onward to its halting-place hard by the Post-office.

The only outside passenger was a burly, honest-looking countryman on the box, who, with his eyes fixed upon the dome of St. Paul's Cathedral, appeared so wrapt in admiring wonder, as to be quite insensible to all the bustle of getting out the bags and parcels, until one of the coach-windows being let sharply down, he looked round, and encountered a pretty female face which was just then thrust out.

"See there, lass!" bawled the countryman, pointing towards the object of his admiration. "There be Paul's Church. 'Ecod, he be a soizable 'un, he be."

"Goodness, John! I shouldn't have thought it could have been half the size. What a monster!"

"Monsther! — Ye're aboot right there, I reckon, Mrs.

Browdie," said the countryman good-humoredly, as he came slowly down in his huge top-coat, "and wa'at dost thee tak' yon place to be noo — thot 'un ower the wa'. Ye'd never coom near it 'gin ye thried for twolve moonths. It's na' but a Poast-office! Ho! ho! They need to charge for dooble-latthers. A Poast-office! Wa'at dost thee think o' thot? 'Ecod, if thot's on'y a Poast-office, I'd loike to see where the Lord Mayor o' Lunnun lives."

So saying, John Browdie — for he it was — opened the coach-door, and tapping Mrs. Browdie, late Miss Price, on the cheek as he looked in, burst into a boisterous fit of laughter.

"Weel!" said John. "Dang my bootuns if she bean't asleep agean!"

"She's been asleep all night, and was, all yesterday, except for a minute or two now and then," replied John Browdie's choice, "and I was very sorry when she woke, for she has been *so* cross!"

The subject of these remarks was a slumbering figure, so muffled in shawl and cloak, that it would have been matter of impossibility to guess at its sex but for a brown-beaver bonnet and green veil which ornamented the head, and which, having been crushed and flattened, for two hundred and fifty miles, in that particular angle of the vehicle from which the lady's snores now proceeded, presented an appearance sufficiently ludicrous to have moved less risible muscles than those of John Browdie's ruddy face.

"Hollo!" cried John, twitching one end of the dragged veil. "Coom, wakken oop, will 'ee."

After several burrowings into the old corner, and many exclamations of impatience and fatigue, the figure

struggled into a sitting posture ; and there, under a mass of crumpled beaver, and surrounded by a semicircle of blue curl-papers, were the delicate features of Miss Fanny Squeers.

"Oh, 'Tilda!" cried Miss Squeers, "How you have been kicking of me through this blessed night!"

"Well, I do like that," replied her friend, laughing, "when you have had nearly the whole coach to yourself."

"Don't deny it, 'Tilda," said Miss Squeers, impressively, "because you have, and it's no use to go attempting to say you haven't. You mightn't have known it in your sleep, 'Tilda, but I haven't closed my eyes for a single wink, and so I *think* I am to be believed."

With which reply, Miss Squeers adjusted the bonnet and veil, which nothing but supernatural interference and an utter suspension of nature's laws could have reduced to any shape or form; and evidently flattering herself that it looked uncommonly neat, brushed off the sandwich-crumbs and bits of biscuit which had accumulated in her lap, and availing herself of John Browdie's proffered arm, descended from the coach.

"Noo," said John, when a hackney-coach had been called, and the ladies and the luggage hurried in, "gang to the Sarah's Head, mun."

"To the *vere?*" cried the coachman.

"Lawk, Mr. Browdie!" interrupted Miss Squeers. "The idea! Saracen's Head."

"Sure-ly," says John, "I know'd it was something aboot Sarah's Son's Head. Dost thou know thot?"

"Oh, ah — I know that," replied the coachman gruffly, as he banged the door.

"'Tilda, dear — really," remonstrated Miss Squeers, "we shall be taken for I don't know what."

"Let them tak' us as they foind us," said John Browdie; "we dean't come to Lunnun to do nought but 'joy oursel', do we?"

"I hope not, Mr. Browdie," replied Miss Squeers, looking singularly dismal.

"Well, then," said John, "it's no matther. I've only been a married man fower days, 'account of poor old feyther deein' and puttin' it off. Here be a weddin' party — broide and broide'smaid, and the groom — if a mun dean't 'joy himsel' noo, when ought he, hey? Drat it all, thot's what I want to know."

So, in order that he might begin to enjoy himself at once, and lose no time, Mr. Browdie gave his wife a hearty kiss, and succeeded in wresting another from Miss Squeers, after a maidenly resistance of scratching and struggling on the part of that young lady, which was not quite over when they reached the Saracen's Head.

Here, the party straightway retired to rest; the refreshment of sleep being necessary after so long a journey; and here they met again about noon, to a substantial breakfast, spread by direction of Mr. John Browdie, in a small private room up-stairs commanding an uninterrupted view of the stables.

To have seen Miss Squeers now, divested of the brown beaver, the green veil, and the blue curl-papers, and arrayed in all the virgin splendor of a white frock and spencer, with a white muslin bonnet, and an imitative damask rose in full bloom on the inside thereof: her luxuriant crop of hair arranged in curls so tight that it was impossible they could come out by any accident, and her bonnet-cap trimmed with little damask roses, which might be supposed to be so many promising scions of the

big one — to have seen all this, and to have seen the broad damask belt, matching both the family rose and the little ones, which encircled her slender waist, and by a happy ingenuity took off from the shortness of the spencer behind, — to have beheld all this, and to have taken further into account the coral bracelets (rather short of beads, and with a very visible black string) which clasped her wrists, and the coral necklace which rested on her neck, supporting, outside her frock, a lonely cornelian heart, typical of her own disengaged affections — to have contemplated all these mute but expressive appeals to the purest feelings of our nature, might have thawed the frost of age, and added new and inextinguishable fuel to the fire of youth.

The waiter was touched. Waiter as he was, he had human passions and feelings, and he looked very hard at Miss Squeers as he handed the muffins.

"Is my pa in, do you know?" asked Miss Squeers with dignity.

"Beg your pardon, Miss?"

"My pa," repeated Miss Squeers; "is he in?"

"In where, Miss?"

"In here — in the house!" replied Miss Squeers. "My pa — Mr. Wackford Squeers — he's stopping here. Is he at home?"

"I didn't know there was any gen'l'man of that name in the house, Miss," replied the waiter. "There may be, in the coffee-room."

May be. Very pretty this, indeed! Here was Miss Squeers, who had been depending, all the way to London, upon showing her friends how much at home she would be, and how much respectful notice her name and connections would excite, told that her father *might* be

there! "As if he was a feller!" observed Miss Squeers, with emphatic indignation.

"Ye'd betther inquire, mun," said John Browdie. "An' hond up another pigeon-pie, will 'ee? Dang the chap," muttered John, looking into the empty dish as the waiter retired; "Does he ca' this a pie — three yoong pigeons and a troifling matther o' steak, and a crust so loight that you doant know when it's in your mooth and when it's gane? I wonder hoo many pies goes to a breakfast!"

After a short interval, which John Browdie employed upon the ham and a cold round of beef, the waiter returned with another pie, and the information that Mr. Squeers was not stopping in the house, but that he came there every day, and that directly he arrived, he should be shown up-stairs. With this, he retired; and he had not retired two minutes, when he returned with Mr. Squeers and his hopeful son.

"Why, who'd have thought of this?" said Mr. Squeers, when he had saluted the party, and received some private family intelligence from his daughter.

"Who, indeed, pa!" replied that young lady, spitefully. "But you see 'Tilda *is* married at last."

"And I stond threat for a soight o' Lunnun, schoolmeasther," said John, vigorously attacking the pie.

"One of them things that young men do when they get married," returned Squeers; "and as runs through with their money like nothing at all! How much better wouldn't it be now, to save it up for the eddication of any little boys, for instance. They come on you," said Mr. Squeers in a moralizing way, "before you're aware of it; mine did upon me."

"Will 'ee pick a bit?" said John.

"I won't myself," returned Squeers; "but if you'll just let little Wackford tuck into something fat, I'll be obliged to you. Give it him in his fingers, else the waiter charges it on, and there's lot of profit on this sort of vittles without that. If you hear the waiter coming, sir, shove it in your pocket and look out of the window, d'ye hear?"

"I'm awake, father," replied the dutiful Wackford.

"Well," said Squeers, turning to his daughter, "It's your turn to be married next. You must make haste."

"Oh, I'm in no hurry," said Miss Squeers, very sharply.

"No, Fanny?" cried her old friend with some archness.

"No, 'Tilda," replied Miss Squeers, shaking her head vehemently. "*I*— can wait."

"So can the young men, it seems, Fanny," observed Mrs. Browdie.

"They a'n't draw'd into it by *me*, 'Tilda," retorted Miss Squeers.

"No," returned her friend; "that's exceedingly true."

The sarcastic tone of this reply might have provoked a rather acrimonious retort from Miss Squeers, who, besides being of a constitutionally vicious temper — aggravated, just now, by travel and recent jolting — was somewhat irritated by old recollections and the failure of her own designs upon Mr. Browdie; and the acrimonious retort might have led to a great many other retorts, which might have led to Heaven knows what, if the subject of conversation had not been, at that precise moment, accidently changed by Mr. Squeers himself.

"What do you think?" said that gentleman; "who do you suppose we have laid hands on, Wackford and me?"

"Pa! not Mr.?" —— Miss Squeers was unable to finish the sentence, but Mrs. Browdie did it for her, and added, "Nickleby?"

"No," said Squeers. "But next door to him though."

"You can't mean Smike?" cried Miss Squeers, clapping her hands.

"Yes, I can though," rejoined her father. "I've got him, hard and fast."

"Wa'at!" exclaimed John Browdie, pushing away his plate. "Got that poor — dom'd scoondrel, — where?"

"Why, in the top back-room, at my lodging," replied Squeers, "with him on one side, and the key on the other."

"At thy loodgin'! Thee'st gotten him at thy loodgin'? Ho! ho! The school-measther agin all England. Give us thee hond, mun; — I'm darned but I must shak' thee by the hond for thot.—Gotten him at thy loodgin'?"

"Yes," replied Squeers, staggering in his chair under the congratulatory blow on the chest which the stout Yorkshireman dealt him — "thankee. Don't do it again. You mean it kindly, I know, but it hurts rather — yes, there he is. That's not so bad, is it?"

"Ba'ad!" repeated John Browdie. "It's eneaf to scare a mun to hear tell on."

"I thought it would surprise you a bit," said Squeers, rubbing his hands. "It was pretty neatly done, and pretty quick too."

"Hoo wor it?" inquired John, sitting down close to him. "Tell us all aboot it, mun; coom, quick!"

Although he could not keep pace with John Browdie's impatience, Mr. Squeers related the lucky chance by which Smike had fallen into his hands, as quickly as he could, and, except when he was interrupted by the

admiring remarks of his auditors, paused not in the recital until he had brought it to an end.

"For fear he should give me the slip, by any chance," observed Squeers, when he had finished, looking very cunning, "I've taken three outsides for to-morrow morning — for Wackford and him and me — and have arranged to leave the accounts and the new boys to the agent, don't you see? So, it's very lucky you come to-day, or you'd have missed us; and as it is, unless you could come and tea with me to-night, we shan't see anything more of you before we go away."

"Dean't say anoother wurd," returned the Yorkshireman, shaking him by the hand. "We'd coom, if it was twonty mile."

"No, would you though?" returned Mr. Squeers, who had not expected quite such a ready acceptance of his invitation, or he would have considered twice before he gave it.

John Browdie's only reply was another squeeze of the hand, and an assurance that they would not begin to see London till to-morrow, so that they might be at Mr. Snawley's at six o'clock without fail; and after some further conversation, Mr. Squeers and his son departed.

During the remainder of the day, Mr. Browdie was in a very odd and excitable state; bursting occasionally into an explosion of laughter, and then taking up his hat and running into the coach-yard to have it out by himself. He was very restless too, constantly walking in and out, and snapping his fingers, and dancing scraps of uncouth country dances, and, in short, conducting himself in such a very extraordinary manner, that Miss Squeers opined he was going mad, and, begging her dear 'Tilda not to distress herself, communicated her

suspicions in so many words. Mrs. Browdie, however, without discovering any great alarm, observed that she had seen him so, once before, and that although he was almost sure to be ill after it, it would not be anything very serious, and therefore he was better left alone.

The result proved her to be perfectly correct; for, while they were all sitting in Mr. Snawley's parlor that night, and just as it was beginning to get dusk, John Browdie was taken so ill, and seized with such an alarming dizziness in the head, that the whole company were thrown into the utmost consternation. His good lady, indeed, was the only person present, who retained presence of mind enough to observe that if he were allowed to lie down on Mr. Squeers's bed for an hour or so, and left entirely to himself, he would be sure to recover again almost as quickly as he had been taken ill. Nobody could refuse to try the effect of so reasonable a proposal, before sending for a surgeon. Accordingly, John was supported up-stairs, with great difficulty; being a monstrous weight, and regularly tumbling down two steps every time they hoisted him up three; and, being laid on the bed, was left in charge of his wife, who, after a short interval, reappeared in the parlor, with the gratifying intelligence that he had fallen fast asleep.

Now, the fact was, that at that particular moment, John Browdie was sitting on the bed with the reddest face ever seen, cramming the corner of the pillow into his mouth, to prevent his roaring out loud with laughter. He had no sooner succeeded in suppressing this emotion, than he slipped off his shoes, and creeping to the adjoining room where the prisoner was confined, turned the key, which was on the outside, and darting in, covered

Smike's mouth with his huge hand before he could utter a sound.

"Ods-bobs, dost thee not know me, mun?" whispered the Yorkshireman to the bewildered lad. "Browdie, — chap as met thee efther school-measther was banged?"

"Yes, yes," cried Smike. "Oh! help me."

"Help thee!" replied John, stopping his mouth again, the instant he had said thus much. "Thee didn't need help, if thee warn't as silly yoongster as ever draw'd breath. Wa'at did 'ee come here for, then?"

"He brought me; oh! he brought me," cried Smike.

"Brout thee!" replied John. "Why didn't 'ee punch his head, or lay theeself doon and kick, and squeal out for the pollis? I'd ha' licked a doozen such as him when I was yoong as thee. But thee be'est a poor broken-doon chap," said John, sadly, "and God forgi' me for bragging ower yan o' his weakest creetur's!"

Smike opened his mouth to speak, but John Browdie stopped him.

"Stan' still," said the Yorkshireman, "and doant 'ee speak a morsel o' talk till I tell 'ee."

With this caution, John Browdie shook his head significantly, and drawing a screw-driver from his pocket, took off the box of the lock in a very deliberate and workmanlike manner, and laid it, together with the implement, on the floor.

"See thot?" said John. "Thot be thy doin'. Noo, coot awa'!"

Smike looked vacantly at him, as if unable to comprehend his meaning.

"I say, coot awa'," repeated John, hastily. "Dost thee know where thee livest? Thee dost? Weel. Are yon thy clothes, or school-measther's?"

"Mine," replied Smike, as the Yorkshireman hurried him to the adjoining room, and pointed out a pair of shoes and a coat which were lying on a chair.

"On wi' 'em," said John, forcing the wrong arm into the wrong sleeve, and winding the tails of the coat round the fugitive's neck. "Noo, foller me, and when thee get'st ootside door, turn to the right, and they wean't see thee pass."

"But — but — he'll hear me shut the door," replied Smike, trembling from head to foot.

"Then dean't shut it at all," retorted John Browdie. "Dang it, thee bean't afeard o' school-measther's takkin' cold, I hope?"

"N-no," said Smike, his teeth chattering in his head. "But he brought me back before, and will again. He will, he will indeed."

"He wull, he wull!" replied John impatiently. "He wean't, he wean't. Look 'ee! I wont to do this neighborly loike, and let them think thee's gotten awa' o' theeself, but if he cooms oot o' thot parlor awhiles theer't clearing off, he mun' have mercy on his oun boans, for I wean't. If he foinds it oot, soon efther, I'll put 'un on a wrong scent, I warrant 'ee. But if thee keep'st a good h'art, thee'lt be at whoam afore they know thee'st gotten off. Coom!"

Smike, who comprehended just enough of this to know it was intended as encouragement, prepared to follow with tottering steps, when John whispered in his ear.

"Thee'lt just tell yoong Measther, that I'm sploiced to 'Tilly Price, and to be heerd on at the Saracen by lather, and that I been't jealous of 'un — dang it, I'm loike to boost when I think o' that neight! 'Cod, I think I see 'un now, a powderin' awa' at the thin bread an' butther!"

It was rather a ticklish recollection for John just then, for he was within an ace of breaking out into a loud guffaw. Restraining himself, however, just in time, by a great effort, he glided down-stairs, hauling Smike behind him; and placing himself close to the parlor-door, to confront the first person that might come out, signed to him to make off.

Having got so far, Smike needed no second bidding. Opening the house-door gently, and casting a look of mingled gratitude and terror at his deliverer, he took the direction which had been indicated to him, and sped away, like the wind.

The Yorkshireman remained on his post, for a few minutes, but, finding that there was no pause in the conversation inside, crept back again unheard, and stood, listening over the stair-rail, for a full hour. Everything remaining perfectly quiet, he got into Mr. Squeers's bed, once more, and drawing the clothes over his head, laughed till he was nearly smothered.

If there could only have been somebody by, to see how the bedclothes shook, and to see the Yorshireman's great red face and round head appear above the sheets, every now and then, like some jovial monster coming to the surface to breathe, and once more dive down convulsed with the laughter which came bursting forth afresh — that somebody would have been scarcely less amused than John Browdie himself.

CHAPTER XL.

IN WHICH NICHOLAS FALLS IN LOVE. HE EMPLOYS A MEDIATOR, WHOSE PROCEEDINGS ARE CROWNED WITH UNEXPECTED SUCCESS, EXCEPTING IN ONE SOLITARY PARTICULAR.

Once more out of the clutches of his old persecutor, it needed no fresh stimulation to call forth the utmost energy and exertion that Smike was capable of summoning to his aid. Without pausing for a moment to reflect upon the course he was taking, or the probability of its leading him homewards or the reverse, he fled away with surprising swiftness and constancy of purpose, borne upon such wings as only Fear can wear, and impelled by imaginary shouts in the well-remembered voice of Squeers, who, with a host of pursuers, seemed to the poor fellow's disordered senses to press hard upon his track; now left at a greater distance in the rear, and now gaining faster and faster upon him, as the alternations of hope and terror agitated him by turns. Long after he had become assured that these sounds were but the creation of his excited brain, he still held on, at a pace, which even weakness and exhaustion could scarcely retard. It was not until the darkness and quiet of a country road, recalled him to a sense of external objects, and the starry sky, above,

warned him of the rapid flight of time, that, covered with dust and panting for breath, he stopped to listen and look about him.

All was still and silent. A glare of light in the distance, casting a warm glow upon the sky, marked where the huge city lay. Solitary fields, divided by hedges and ditches, through many of which he had crashed and scrambled in his flight, skirted the road, both by the way he had come and upon the opposite side. It was late now. They could scarcely trace him by such paths as he had taken, and if he could hope to regain his own dwelling, it must surely be at such a time as that, and under cover of the darkness. This, by degrees, became pretty plain, even to the mind of Smike. He had, at first entertained some vague and childish idea of travelling into the country for ten or a dozen miles, and then returning homewards by a wide circuit, which should keep him clear of London — so great was his apprehension of traversing the streets alone, lest he should again encounter his dreaded enemy — but, yielding to the conviction which these thoughts inspired, he turned back, and taking the open road, though not without many fears and misgivings, made for London again, with scarcely less speed of foot than that with which he had left the temporary abode of Mr. Squeers.

By the time he reëntered it, at the western extremity, the greater part of the shops were closed. Of the throngs of people who had been tempted abroad after the heat of the day, but few remained in the streets, and they were lounging home. But of these he asked his way from time to time, and, by dint of repeated inquiries, he at length reached the dwelling of Newman Noggs.

All that evening, Newman had been hunting and searching in by-ways and corners for the very person who now knocked at his door, while Nicholas had been pursuing the same inquiry in other directions. He was sitting, with a melancholy air, at his poor supper, when Smike's timorous and uncertain knock reached his ears. Alive to every sound, in his anxious and expectant state, Newman hurried down-stairs, and, uttering a cry of joyful surprise, dragged the welcome visitor into the passage and up the stairs, and said not a word until he had him safe in his own garret and the door was shut behind them, when he mixed a great mug-full of gin and water, and holding it to Smike's mouth, as one might hold a bowl of medicine to the lips of a refractory child, commanded him to drain it to the last drop.

Newman looked uncommonly blank when he found that Smike did little more than put his lips to the precious mixture; he was in the act of raising the mug to his own mouth with a deep sigh of compassion for his poor friend's weakness, when Smike, beginning to relate the adventures which had befallen him, arrested him half-way, and he stood listening, with the mug in his hand.

It was odd enough to see the change that came over Newman as Smike proceeded. At first he stood, rubbing his lips with the back of his hand, as a preparatory ceremony towards composing himself for a draught; then, at the mention of Squeers, he took the mug under his arm, and opening his eyes very wide, looked on, in the utmost astonishment. When Smike came to the assault upon himself, in the hackney-coach, he hastily deposited the mug upon the table, and limped up and down the room in a state of the greatest excitement, stopping himself with a jerk, every now and

then, as if to listen more attentively. When John Browdie came to be spoken of, he dropped, by slow and gradual degrees, into a chair, and rubbing his hands upon his knees — quicker and quicker as the story reached its climax — burst, at last, into a laugh composed of one loud sonorous "Ha! ha!" having given vent to which, his countenance immediately fell again as he inquired with the utmost anxiety, whether it was probable that John Browdie and Squeers had come to blows.

"No! I think not," replied Smike. "I don't think he could have missed me till I had got quite away."

Newman scratched his head with a show of great disappointment, and once more lifting up the mug, applied himself to the contents; smiling meanwhile, over the rim, with a grim and ghastly smile at Smike.

"You shall stay here," said Newman; "you're tired — fagged. I'll tell them you're come back. They have been half mad about you. Mr. Nicholas" —

"God bless him!" cried Smike.

"Amen!" returned Newman. "He hasn't had a minute's rest or peace; no more has the old lady, nor Miss Nickleby."

"No, no. Has *she* thought about me?" said Smike. "Has she though? oh, has she — has she? Don't tell me so, if she has not."

"She has," cried Newman. "She is as noble-hearted as she is beautiful."

"Yes, yes!" cried Smike. "Well said!"

"So mild and gentle," said Newman.

"Yes, yes!" cried Smike, with increasing eagerness.

"And yet with such a true and gallant spirit," pursued Newman.

He was going on, in his enthusiasm, when, chancing

to look at his companion, he saw that he had covered his face with his hands, and that tears were stealing out between his fingers.

A moment before, the boy's eyes were sparkling with unwonted fire, and every feature had been lighted up with an excitement which made him appear, for the moment, quite a different being.

"Well, well," muttered Newman, as if he were a little puzzled. "It has touched *me*, more than once, to think such a nature should have been exposed to such trials; this poor fellow — yes, yes, — he feels that too — it softens him — makes him think of his former misery. Hah! That's it? Yes, that's — hum!"

It was by no means clear, from the tone of these broken reflections, that Newman Noggs considered them as explaining, at all satisfactorily, the emotion which had suggested them. He sat, in a musing attitude, for some time, regarding Smike occasionally with an anxious and doubtful glance, which sufficiently showed that he was not very remotely connected with his thoughts.

At length he repeated his proposition that Smike should remain where he was for that night, and that he (Noggs) should straightway repair to the cottage to relieve the suspense of the family. But, as Smike would not hear of this — pleading his anxiety to see his friends again — they eventually sallied forth together; and the night being, by this time, far advanced, and Smike being, besides, so foot-sore that he could hardly crawl along, it was within an hour of sunrise when they reached their destination.

At the first sound of their voices outside the house, Nicholas, who had passed a sleepless night, devising schemes for the recovery of his lost charge, started

from his bed, and joyfully admitted them. There was so much noisy conversation, and congratulation, and indignation, that the remainder of the family were soon awakened, and Smike received a warm and cordial welcome, not only from Kate, but from Mrs. Nickleby also, who assured him of her future favor and regard, and was so obliging as to relate, for his entertainment and that of the assembled circle, a most remarkable account extracted from some work the name of which she had never known, of a miraculous escape from some prison, but what one she couldn't remember, effected by an officer whose name she had forgotten, confined for some crime which she didn't clearly recollect.

At first Nicholas was disposed to give his uncle credit for some portion of this bold attempt (which had so nearly proved successful) to carry off Smike; but, on more mature consideration, he was inclined to think that the full merit of it rested with Mr. Squeers. Determined to ascertain if he could, through John Browdie, how the case really stood, he betook himself to his daily occupation: meditating as he went, on a great variety of schemes for the punishment of the Yorkshire schoolmaster, all of which had their foundation in the strictest principles of retributive justice, and had but the one drawback of being wholly impracticable.

"A fine morning, Mr. Linkinwater!" said Nicholas, entering the office.

"Ah!" replied Tim, "talk of the country, indeed! What do you think of this, now, for a day — a London day — eh?"

"It's a little clearer out of town," said Nicholas.

"Clearer!" echoed Tim Linkinwater. "You should see it from my bedroom-window."

"You should see it from *mine*," replied Nicholas, with a smile.

"Pooh! pooh!" said Tim Linkinwater, "don't tell me. Country!" (Bow was quite a rustic place to Tim,) "Nonsense! What can you get in the country but new-laid eggs and flowers? I can buy new-laid eggs in Leadenhall market, any morning before breakfast; and as to flowers, it's worth a run up-stairs to smell my mignonette, or to see the double-wallflower in the back-attic window, at No. 6, in the court."

"There is a double-wallflower at No. 6, in the court, is there?" said Nicholas.

"Yes, is there!" replied Tim, "and planted in a cracked jug, without a spout. There were hyacinths there, this last spring, blossoming in —— but you'll laugh at that, of course."

"At what?"

"At their blossoming in old blacking-bottles," said Tim.

"Not I, indeed," returned Nicholas.

Tim looked wistfully at him, for a moment, as if he were encouraged by the tone of this reply to be more communicative on the subject; and sticking behind his ear a pen that he had been making, and shutting up his knife with a smart click, said,

"They belong to a sickly bed-ridden hump-backed boy, and seem to be the only pleasures, Mr. Nickleby, of his sad existence. How many years is it," said Tim, pondering, "since I first noticed him, quite a little child, dragging himself about on a pair of tiny crutches? Well! Well! not many; but though they would appear nothing, if I thought of other things, they seem a long, long time, when I think of him. It is a sad thing,"

said Tim, breaking off, "to see a little deformed child sitting apart from other children, who are active and merry, watching the games he is denied the power to share in. He made my heart ache very often."

"It is a good heart," said Nicholas, "that disentangles itself from the close avocations of every day, to heed such things. You were saying" ——

"That the flowers belonged to this poor boy," said Tim; "that's all. When it is fine weather, and he can crawl out of bed, he draws a chair close to the window, and sits there, looking at them and arranging them, all day long. We used to nod, at first, and then we came to speak. Formerly, when I called to him of a morning, and asked him how he was, he would smile, and say, 'better;' but now he shakes his head, and only bends more closely over his old plants. It must be dull to watch the dark house-tops and the flying clouds, for so many months; but he is very patient."

"Is there nobody in the house to cheer or help him?" asked Nicholas.

"His father lives there, I believe," replied Tim, "and other people too; but no one seems to care much for the poor sickly cripple. I have asked him, very often, if I can do nothing for him; his answer is always the same, — 'Nothing.' His voice is growing weak of late, but I can *see* that he makes the old reply. He can't leave his bed now, so they have moved it close beside the window, and there he lies, all day: now looking at the sky, and now at his flowers, which he still makes shift to trim and water, with his own thin hands. At night, when he sees my candle, he draws back his curtain, and leaves it so, till I am in bed. It seems such company to him to know that I am there, that I often sit at my window for an

hour or more, that he may see I am still awake; and sometimes I get up in the night to look at the dull melancholy light in his little room, and wonder whether he is awake or sleeping.

"The night will not be long coming," said Tim, "when he will sleep, and never wake again on earth. We have never so much as shaken hands in all our lives; and yet I shall miss him like an old friend. Are there any country flowers that could interest me like these, do you think? Or do you suppose that the withering of a hundred kinds of the choicest flowers that blow, called by the hardest Latin names that were ever invented, would give me one fraction of the pain that I shall feel when these old jugs and bottles are swept away as lumber! Country!" cried Tim, with a contemptuous emphasis; "don't you know that I couldn't have such a court under my bedroom-window, anywhere, but in London?"

With which inquiry, Tim turned his back, and pretending to be absorbed in his accounts, took an opportunity of hastily wiping his eyes when he supposed Nicholas was looking another way.

Whether it was that Tim's accounts were more than usually intricate that morning, or whether it was that his habitual serenity had been a little disturbed by these recollections, it so happened that when Nicholas returned from executing some commission, and inquired whether Mr. Charles Cheeryble was alone in his room, Tim promptly, and without the smallest hesitation, replied in the affirmative, although somebody had passed into the room not ten minutes before, and Tim took especial and particular pride in preventing any intrusion on either of the brothers when they were engaged with any visitor whatever.

"I'll take this letter to him at once," said Nicholas, "if that's the case." And with that, he walked to the room and knocked at the door.

No answer.

Another knock, and still no answer.

"He can't be here," thought Nicholas. "I'll lay it on his table."

So, Nicholas opened the door and walked in; and very quickly he turned to walk out again, when he saw, to his great astonishment and discomfiture, a young lady upon her knees at Mr. Cheeryble's feet, and Mr. Cheeryble beseeching her to rise, and entreating a third person, who had the appearance of the young lady's female attendant, to add her persuasions to his to induce her to do so.

Nicholas stammered out an awkward apology, and was precipitately retiring, when the young lady, turning her head a little, presented to his view the features of the lovely girl whom he had seen at the register-office on his first visit long before. Glancing from her to the attendant, he recognized the same clumsy servant who had accompanied her then; and between his admiration of the young lady's beauty, and the confusion and surprise of this unexpected recognition, he stood stock-still, in such a bewildered state of surprise and embarrassment that, for the moment, he was quite bereft of the power either to speak or move.

"My dear ma'am — my dear young lady," cried brother Charles in violent agitation, "pray don't — not another word, I beseech and entreat you! I implore you — I beg of you — to rise. We — we — are not alone."

As he spoke, he raised the young lady, who staggered to a chair and swooned away.

"She has fainted, sir," said Nicholas, darting eagerly forward.

"Poor dear, poor dear!" cried brother Charles. "Where is my brother Ned? Ned, my dear brother, come here pray."

"Brother Charles, my dear fellow," replied his brother, hurrying into the room, "what is the —— ah! what" ——

"Hush! hush! — not a word for your life, brother Ned," returned the other. "Ring for the house-keeper, my dear brother — call Tim Linkinwater! Here, Tim Linkinwater, sir — Mr. Nickleby, my dear sir, leave the room, I beg and beseech of you."

"I think she is better now," said Nicholas, who had been watching the patient so eagerly, that he had not heard the request.

"Poor bird!" cried brother Charles, gently taking her hand in his, and laying her head upon his arm. "Brother Ned, my dear fellow, you will be surprised, I know, to witness this, in business hours; but" — here he was again reminded of the presence of Nicholas, and, shaking him by the hand, earnestly requested him to leave the room, and to send Tim Linkinwater without an instant's delay.

Nicholas immediately withdrew, and, on his way to the counting-house, met both the old house-keeper and Tim Linkinwater, jostling each other in the passage, and hurrying to the scene of action with extraordinary speed. Without waiting to hear his message, Tim Linkinwater darted into the room, and presently afterwards Nicholas heard the door shut and locked on the inside.

He had abundance of time to ruminate on this discovery, for Tim Linkinwater was absent during the

greater part of an hour, during the whole of which time Nicholas thought of nothing but the young lady, and her exceeding beauty, and what could possibly have brought her there, and why they made such a mystery of it. The more he thought of all this, the more it perplexed him, and the more anxious he became to know who and what she was. "I should have known her among ten thousand," thought Nicholas. And with that he walked up and down the room, and recalling her face and figure (of which he had a peculiarly vivid remembrance), discarded all other subjects of reflection and dwelt upon that alone.

At length Tim Linkinwater came back — provokingly cool, and with papers in his hand, and a pen in his mouth, as if nothing had happened.

"Is she quite recovered?" said Nicholas, impetuously.

"Who?" returned Tim Linkinwater.

"Who!" repeated Nicholas. "The young lady."

"What do you make, Mr. Nickleby," said Tim, taking his pen out of his mouth, "what do you make of four hundred and twenty-seven times three thousand two hundred and thirty-eight?"

"Nay," returned Nicholas, "what do you make of my question first? I asked you" ——

"About the young lady," said Tim Linkinwater, putting on his spectacles. "To be sure. Yes. Oh! she's very well."

"Very well, is she?" returned Nicholas.

"*Very* well," replied Mr. Linkinwater, gravely.

"Will she be able to go home to-day?" asked Nicholas.

"She's gone," said Tim.

"Gone!"

"Yes."

"I hope she has not far to go?" said Nicholas, looking earnestly at the other.

"Aye," replied the immovable Tim, "I hope she hasn't."

Nicholas hazarded one or two further remarks, but it was evident that Tim Linkinwater had his own reasons for evading the subject, and that he was determined to afford no further information respecting the fair unknown, who had awakened so much curiosity in the breast of his young friend. Nothing daunted by this repulse, Nicholas returned to the charge next day, emboldened by the circumstance of Mr. Linkinwater being in a very talkative and communicative mood; but, directly he resumed the theme, Tim relapsed into a state of most provoking taciturnity, and from answering in monosyllables, came to returning no answers at all, save such as were to be inferred from several grave nods and shrugs, which only served to whet that appetite for intelligence in Nicholas, which had already attained a most unreasonable height.

Foiled in these attempts, he was fain to content himself with watching for the young lady's next visit, but here again he was disappointed. Day after day passed, and she did not return. He looked eagerly at the superscription of all the notes and letters, but there was not one among them which he could fancy to be in her handwriting. On two or three occasions he was employed on business which took him to a distance, and had formerly been transacted by Tim Linkinwater. Nicholas could not help suspecting that, for some reason or other, he was sent out of the way on purpose, and that the young lady was there in his absence. Nothing transpired, how-

ever, to confirm this suspicion, and Tim could not be entrapped into any confession or admission tending to support it in the smallest degree.

Mystery and disappointment are not absolutely indispensable to the growth of love, but they are, very often, its powerful auxiliaries. "Out of sight, out of mind," is well enough as a proverb applicable to cases of friendship, though absence is not always necessary to hollowness of heart, even between friends, and truth and honesty, like precious stones, are perhaps most easily imitated at a distance, when the counterfeits often pass for real. Love, however, is very materially assisted by a warm and active imagination: which has a long memory, and will thrive, for a considerable time, on very slight and sparing food. Thus it is, that it often attains its most luxuriant growth in separation and under circumstances of the utmost difficulty; and thus it was, that Nicholas, thinking of nothing but the unknown young lady, from day to day and from hour to hour, began, at last, to think that he was very desperately in love with her, and that never was such an ill-used and persecuted lover as he.

Still, though he loved and languished after the most orthodox models, and was only deterred from making a confidante of Kate by the slight considerations of having never, in all his life, spoken to the object of his passion, and having never set eyes upon her, except on two occasions, on both of which she had come and gone like a flash of lightning — or, as Nicholas himself said, in the numerous conversations he held with himself, like a vision of youth and beauty much too bright to last — his ardor and devotion remained without its reward. The young lady appeared no more; so there was a

great deal of love wasted (enough indeed to have set up half-a-dozen young gentlemen, as times go, with the utmost decency) and nobody was a bit the wiser for it; not even Nicholas himself, who, on the contrary, became more dull, sentimental, and lackadaisical, every day.

While matters were in this state, the failure of a correspondent of the Brothers Cheeryble, in Germany, imposed upon Tim Linkinwater and Nicholas the necessity of going through some very long and complicated accounts, extending over a considerable space of time. To get through them with the greater despatch, Tim Linkinwater proposed that they should remain at the counting-house, for a week or so, until ten o'clock at night; to this, as nothing damped the zeal of Nicholas in the service of his kind patrons — not even romance, which has seldom business habits — he cheerfully assented. On the very first night of these later hours, at nine exactly, there came: not the young lady herself, but her servant, who, being closeted with brother Charles for some time, went away, and returned next night at the same hour, and on the next, and on the next again.

These repeated visits inflamed the curiosity of Nicholas to the very highest pitch. Tantalized and excited, beyond all bearing, and unable to fathom the mystery without neglecting his duty, he confided the whole secret to Newman Noggs, imploring him to be on the watch next night; to follow the girl home; to set on foot such inquiries relative to the name, condition, and history of her mistress, as he could, without exciting suspicion; and to report the result to him with the least possible delay.

Beyond all measure proud of this commission, Newman Noggs took up his post, in the square, on the following evening, a full hour before the needful time, and

planting himself behind the pump and pulling his hat over his eyes, began his watch with an elaborate appearance of mystery, admirably calculated to excite the suspicion of all beholders. Indeed, divers servant-girls who came to draw water, and sundry little boys who stopped to drink at the ladle, were almost scared out of their senses, by the apparition of Newman Noggs looking stealthily round the pump, with nothing of him visible but his face, and that wearing the expression of a meditative Ogre.

Punctual to her time, the messenger came again, and, after an interview of rather longer duration than usual, departed. Newman had made two appointments with Nicholas: one for the next evening, conditional on his success: and one the next night following, which was to be kept under all circumstances. The first night he was not at the place of meeting (a certain tavern about half-way between the City and Golden Square), but on the second night he was there, before Nicholas, and received him with open arms.

"It's all right," whispered Newman. "Sit down — sit down, there's a dear young man, and let me tell you all about it."

Nicholas needed no second invitation, and eagerly inquired what was the news.

"There's a great deal of news," said Newman, in a flutter of exultation. "It's all right. Don't be anxious. I don't know where to begin. Never mind that. Keep up your spirits. It's all right."

"Well?" said Nicholas eagerly, "Yes?"

"Yes," replied Newman. "That's it."

"What's it?" said Nicholas. "The name — the name, my dear fellow!"

"The name's Bobster," replied Newman.

"Bobster!" repeated Nicholas, indignantly.

"That's the name," said Newman. "I remember it by lobster."

"Bobster!" repeated Nicholas, more emphatically than before. "That must be the servant's name."

"No, it a'n't," said Newman, shaking his head with great positiveness. "Miss Cecilia Bobster."

"Cecilia, eh?" returned Nicholas, muttering the two names together over and over again in every variety of tone, to try the effect. "Well, Cecilia is a pretty name."

"Very. And a pretty creature too," said Newman.

"Who?" said Nicholas.

"Miss Bobster."

"Why, where have you seen her?" demanded Nicholas.

"Never mind, my dear boy," retorted Noggs, clapping him on the shoulder. "I *have* seen her. You shall see her. I've managed it all."

"My dear Newman," cried Nicholas, grasping his hand, "are you serious?"

"I am," replied Newman. "I mean it all. Every word. You shall see her to-morrow night. She consents to hear you speak for yourself. I persuaded her. She is all affability, goodness, sweetness, and beauty."

"I know she is; I know she must be, Newman!" said Nicholas, wringing his hand.

"You are right," returned Newman.

"Where does she live?" cried Nicholas. "What have you learnt of her history? Has she a father — mother — any brothers — sisters? What did she say? How came you to see her? Was she not very much surprised? Did you say how passionately I have longed to speak to her? Did you tell her where I had seen

her? Did you tell her how, and when, and where, and how long, and how often, I have thought of that sweet face which came upon me in my bitterest distress like a glimpse of some better world — did you, Newman — did you?"

Poor Noggs literally gasped for breath as this flood of questions rushed upon him, and moved spasmodically in his chair at every fresh inquiry, staring at Nicholas meanwhile with a most ludicrous expression of perplexity.

"No," said Newman, "I didn't tell her that."

"Didn't tell her which?" asked Nicholas.

"About the glimpse of the better world," said Newman. "I didn't tell her who you were, either, or where you'd seen her. I said you loved her to distraction."

"That's true, Newman," replied Nicholas, with his characteristic vehemence. "Heaven knows I do!"

"I said too, that you had admired her for a long time in secret," said Newman.

"Yes, yes. What did she say to that?" asked Nicholas.

"Blushed," said Newman.

"To be sure. Of course she would," said Nicholas approvingly.

Newman then went on to say, that the young lady was an only child, that her mother was dead, that she resided with her father, and that she had been induced to allow her lover a secret interview, at the intercession of her servant, who had great influence with her. He further related how it required much moving and great eloquence to bring the young lady to this pass; how it was expressly understood that she merely afforded Nicholas an opportunity of declaring his passion; and how she

by no means pledged herself to be favorably impressed with his attentions. The mystery of her visits to the Brothers Cheeryble, remained wholly unexplained, for Newman had not alluded to them, either in his preliminary conversations with the servant or his subsequent interview with the mistress, merely remarking that he had been instructed to watch the girl home and plead his young friend's cause, and not saying how far he had followed her, or from what point. But Newman hinted that from what had fallen from the confidante, he had been led to suspect that the young lady led a very miserable and unhappy life, under the strict control of her only parent, who was of a violent and brutal temper —a circumstance which he thought might in some degree account, both for her having sought the protection and friendship of the brothers, and her suffering herself to be prevailed upon to grant the promised interview. The last he held to be a very logical deduction from the premises, inasmuch as it was but natural to suppose that a young lady, whose present condition was so unenviable, would be more than commonly desirous to change it.

It appeared, on further questioning — for it was only by a very long and arduous process that all this could be got out of Newman Noggs — that Newman, in explanation of his shabby appearance, had represented himself as being, for certain wise and indispensable purposes connected with that intrigue, in disguise; and, being questioned how he had come to exceed his commission so far, as to procure an interview, he responded, that the lady appearing willing to grant it, he considered himself bound, both in duty and gallantry, to avail himself of such a golden means of enabling Nicholas to prosecute

his addresses. After these and all possible questions had been asked and answered twenty times over, they parted, undertaking to meet on the following night at half-past ten, for the purpose of fulfilling the appointment: which was for eleven o'clock.

"Things come about very strangely!" thought Nicholas, as he walked home. "I never contemplated anything of this kind; never dreamt of the possibility of it. To know something of the life of one in whom I felt such interest; to see her in the street, to pass the house in which she lived, to meet her sometimes in her walks, to hope that a day might come when I might be in a condition to tell her of my love, this was the utmost extent of my thoughts. Now, however — but I should be a fool, indeed, to repine at my own good fortune!"

Still, Nicholas was dissatisfied; and there was more in the dissatisfaction than mere revulsion of feeling. He was angry with the young lady for being so easily won, "because," reasoned Nicholas, "it is not as if she knew it was I, but it might have been anybody," — which was certainly not pleasant. The next moment, he was angry with himself for entertaining such thoughts, arguing that nothing but goodness could dwell in such a temple, and that the behavior of the brothers sufficiently showed the estimation in which they held her. "The fact is, she's a mystery altogether," said Nicholas. This was not more satisfactory than his previous course of reflection, and only drove him out upon a new sea of speculation and conjecture, where he tossed and tumbled, in great discomfort of mind, until the clock struck ten, and the hour of meeting drew nigh.

Nicholas had dressed himself with great care, and even

Newman Noggs had trimmed himself up a little: his coat presenting the phenomenon of two consecutive buttons, and the supplementary pins being inserted at tolerably regular intervals. He wore his hat, too, in the newest taste, with a pocket-handkerchief in the crown, and a twisted end of it straggling out behind after the fashion of a pigtail, though he could scarcely lay claim to the ingenuity of inventing this latter decoration, inasmuch as he was utterly unconscious of it: being in a nervous and excited condition which rendered him quite insensible to everything but the great object of the expedition.

They traversed the streets, in profound silence; and after walking at a round pace for some distance, arrived in one, of a gloomy appearance and very little frequented, near the Edgeware-road.

"Number twelve," said Newman.

"Oh!" replied Nicholas, looking about him.

"Good street?" said Newman.

"Yes," returned Nicholas. "Rather dull."

Newman made no answer to this remark, but, halting, abruptly, planted Nicholas with his back to some area railings, and gave him to understand that he was to wait there, without moving hand or foot, until it was satisfactorily ascertained that the coast was clear. This done, Noggs limped away with great alacrity; looking over his shoulder every instant, to make quite certain that Nicholas was obeying his directions; and, ascending the steps of a house some half-dozen doors off, was lost to view.

After a short delay, he reappeared, and limping back again, halted midway, and beckoned Nicholas to follow him.

"Well?" said Nicholas, advancing towards him on tiptoe.

"All right," replied Newman, in high glee. "All ready; nobody at home. Couldn't be better. Ha! ha!"

With this fortifying assurance, he stole past a street-door, on which Nicholas caught a glimpse of a brass plate, with "BOBSTER," in very large letters; and, stopping at the area-gate, which was open, signed to his young friend to descend.

"What the devil!" cried Nicholas, drawing back. "Are we to sneak into the kitchen, as if we came after the forks?"

"Hush!" replied Newman. "Old Bobster — ferocious Turk. He'd kill 'em all — box the young lady's ears — he does — often."

"What!" cried Nicholas, in high wrath, "do you mean to tell me that any man would dare to box the ears of such a" ——

He had no time to sing the praises of his mistress, just then, for Newman gave him a gentle push which had nearly precipitated him to the bottom of the area steps. Thinking it best to take the hint in good part, Nicholas descended, without further remonstrance, but with a countenance bespeaking anything rather than the hope and rapture of a passionate lover. Newman followed — he would have followed head first, but for the timely assistance of Nicholas — and, taking his hand, led him through a stone passage, profoundly dark, into a black kitchen or cellar, of the blackest and most pitchy obscurity, where they stopped.

"Well!" said Nicholas, in a discontented whisper, "this is not all, I suppose, is it?"

"No, no," rejoined Noggs; "they'll be here directly. It's all right."

"I am glad to hear it," said Nicholas. "I shouldn't have thought it, I confess."

They exchanged no further words, and there Nicholas stood, listening to the loud breathing of Newman Noggs, and imagining that his nose seemed to glow like a red-hot coal, even in the midst of the darkness which enshrouded them. Suddenly, the sound of cautious footsteps attracted his ear, and directly afterwards a female voice inquired if the gentleman was there.

"Yes," replied Nicholas, turning towards the corner from which the voice proceeded. "Who is that?"

"Only me, sir," replied the voice. "Now if you please, ma'am."

A gleam of light shone into the place, and presently the servant-girl appeared, bearing a light, and followed by her young mistress, who seemed to be overwhelmed by modesty and confusion.

At the sight of the young lady, Nicholas started and changed color; his heart beat violently, and he stood rooted to the spot. At that instant, and almost simultaneously with her arrival and that of the candle, there was heard a loud and furious knocking at the street-door, which caused Newman Noggs to jump up, with great agility, from a beer-barrel on which he had been seated astride, and to exclaim abruptly, and with a face of ashy paleness, "Bobster, by the Lord!"

The young lady shrieked, the attendant wrung her hands, Nicholas gazed from one to the other in apparent stupefaction, and Newman hurried to and fro, thrusting his hands into all his pockets successively, and drawing out the linings of every one in the excess of his irreso-

lution. It was but a moment, but the confusion crowded into that one moment no imagination can exaggerate.

"Leave the house, for Heaven's sake! We have done wrong — we deserve it all," cried the young lady. "Leave the house, or I am ruined and undone forever."

"Will you hear me say but one word!" cried Nicholas. "Only one. I will not detain you. Will you hear me say one word, in explanation of this mischance?"

But Nicholas might as well have spoken to the wind, for the young lady, with distracted looks, hurried up the stairs. He would have followed her, but Newman, twisting his hand in his coat-collar, dragged him towards the passage by which they had entered.

"Let me go, Newman, in the Devil's name!" cried Nicholas. "I must speak to her — I will! I will not leave this house without."

"Reputation — character — violence — consider," said Newman, clinging round him with both arms, and hurrying him away. "Let them open the door. We'll go, as we came, directly it's shut. Come. This way. Here."

Overpowered by the remonstrances of Newman, and the tears and prayers of the girl, and the tremendous knocking above, which had never ceased, Nicholas allowed himself to be hurried off; and, precisely as Mr. Bobster made his entrance by the street-door, he and Noggs made their exit by the area-gate.

They hurried away, through several streets, without stopping or speaking. At last, they halted and confronted each other with blank and rueful faces.

"Never mind," said Newman, gasping for breath. "Don't be cast down. It's all right. More fortunate next time. It couldn't be helped. I did *my* part."

"Excellently," replied Nicholas, taking his hand. "Excellently, and like the true and zealous friend you are. Only — mind, I am not disappointed, Newman, and feel just as much indebted to you — only *it was the wrong lady.*"

"Eh?" cried Newman Noggs. "Taken in by the servant?"

"Newman, Newman," said Nicholas, laying his hand upon his shoulder: "it was the wrong servant too."

Newman's under-jaw dropped, and he gazed at Nicholas, with his sound eye fixed fast and motionless in his head.

"Don't take it to heart," said Nicholas; "it's of no consequence; you see I don't care about it; you followed the wrong person, that's all."

That *was* all. Whether Newman Noggs had looked round the pump, in a slanting direction, so long, that his sight became impaired; or whether, finding that there was time to spare, he had recruited himself with a few drops of something stronger than the pump could yield — by whatsoever means it had come to pass, this was his mistake. And Nicholas went home to brood upon it, and to meditate upon the charms of the unknown young lady, now as far beyond his reach as ever.

CHAPTER XLI.

CONTAINING SOME ROMANTIC PASSAGES BETWEEN MRS. NICKLEBY AND THE GENTLEMAN IN THE SMALL-CLOTHES NEXT DOOR.

Ever since her last momentous conversation with her son, Mrs. Nickleby had begun to display unusual care in the adornment of her person, gradually superadding to those staid and matronly habiliments, which had, up to that time, formed her ordinary attire, a variety of embellishments and decorations, slight perhaps in themselves, but, taken together, and considered with reference to the subject of her disclosure, of no mean importance. Even her black dress assumed something of a deadly-lively air from the jaunty style in which it was worn; and, eked out as its lingering attractions were, by a prudent disposal, here and there, of certain juvenile ornaments of little or no value, which had, for that reason alone, escaped the general wreck and been permitted to slumber peacefully in odd corners of old drawers and boxes where daylight seldom shone, her mourning garments assumed quite a new character. From being the outward tokens of respect and sorrow for the dead, they became converted into signals of very slaughterous and killing designs upon the living.

Mrs. Nickleby might have been stimulated to this

proceeding by a lofty sense of duty, and impulses of unquestionable excellence. She might, by this time, have become impressed with the sinfulness of long indulgence in unavailing woe, or the necessity of setting a proper example of neatness and decorum to her blooming daughter. Considerations of duty and responsibility apart, the change might have taken its rise in feelings of the purest and most disinterested charity. The gentleman next door had been vilified by Nicholas; rudely stigmatized as a dotard and an idiot; and for these attacks upon his understanding, Mrs. Nickleby was, in some sort, accountable. She might have felt that it was the act of a good Christian to show, by all means in her power, that the abused gentleman was neither the one nor the other. And what better means could she adopt, towards so virtuous and laudable an end, than proving to all men, in her own person, that his passion was the most rational and reasonable in the world, and just the very result, of all others, which discreet and thinking persons might have foreseen, from her incautiously displaying her matured charms, without reserve, under the very eye, as it were, of an ardent and too-susceptible man?

"Ah!" said Mrs. Nickleby, gravely shaking her head; "if Nicholas knew what his poor dear papa suffered before we were engaged, when I used to hate him, he would have a little more feeling. Shall I ever forget the morning I looked scornfully at him when he offered to carry my parasol? Or that night when I frowned at him? It was a mercy he didn't emigrate. It very nearly drove him to it."

Whether the deceased might not have been better off if he had emigrated in his bachelor days, was a question

which his relict did not stop to consider; for Kate entered the room, with her work-box, in this stage of her reflections; and a much slighter interruption, or no interruption at all, would have diverted Mrs. Nickleby's thoughts into a new channel at any time.

"Kate, my dear," said Mrs. Nickleby; "I don't know how it is, but a fine warm summer day like this, with the birds singing in every direction, always puts me in mind of roast pig, with sage and onion sauce, and made gravy."

"That's a curious association of ideas, is it not, mamma?"

"Upon my word, my dear, I don't know," replied Mrs. Nickleby. "Roast pig — let me see. On the day five weeks after you were christened, we had a roast — no that couldn't have been a pig, either, because I recollect there were a pair of them to carve, and your poor papa and I could never have thought of sitting down to two pigs — they must have been partridges. Roast pig! I hardly think we ever could have had one, now I come to remember, for your papa could never bear the sight of them in the shops, and used to say that they always put him in mind of very little babies, only the pigs had much fairer complexions; and he had a horror of little babies, too, because he couldn't very well afford any increase to his family, and had a natural dislike to the subject. It's very odd now, what can have put that in my head! I recollect dining once at Mrs. Bevan's, in that broad street round the corner by the coach-maker's, where the tipsy man fell through the cellar-flap of an empty house nearly a week before the quarter-day, and wasn't found till the new tenant went in — and we had roast pig there. It must be that, I think, that reminds me of

it, especially as there was a little bird in the room that would keep on singing all the time of dinner — at least, not a little bird, for it was a parrot, and he didn't sing exactly, for he talked and swore dreadfully; but I think it must be that. Indeed I am sure it must. Shouldn't you say so, my dear?"

"I should say there was not a doubt about it, mamma," returned Kate, with a cheerful smile.

"No; but *do* you think so, Kate?" said Mrs. Nickleby, with as much gravity as if it were a question of the most imminent and thrilling interest. "If you don't, say so at once, you know; because it's just as well to be correct, particularly on a point of this kind, which is very curious and worth settling while one thinks about it."

Kate laughingly replied that she was quite convinced; and as her mamma still appeared undetermined whether it was not absolutely essential that the subject should be renewed, proposed that they should take their work into the summer-house, and enjoy the beauty of the afternoon. Mrs. Nickleby readily assented, and to the summer-house they repaired, without further discussion.

"Well, I will say," observed Mrs. Nickleby, as she took her seat, "that there never was such a good creature as Smike. Upon my word, the pains he has taken in putting this little arbor to rights, and training the sweetest flowers about it, are beyond anything I could have —— I wish he wouldn't put *all* the gravel on your side, Kate, my dear, though, and leave nothing but mould for me."

"Dear mamma," returned Kate, hastily, "take this seat — do — to oblige me, mamma."

"No, indeed, my dear. I shall keep my own side," said Mrs. Nickleby. "Well! I declare!"

Kate looked up inquiringly.

"If he hasn't been," said Mrs. Nickleby, "and got, from somewhere or other, a couple of roots of those flowers that I said I was so fond of, the other night, and asked you if you were not — no, that *you* said *you* were so fond of, the other night, and asked me if I wasn't — it's the same thing — now, upon my word, I take that as very kind and attentive indeed! I don't see," added Mrs. Nickleby, looking narrowly about her, "any of them, on my side, but I suppose they grow best near the gravel. You may depend upon it they do, Kate, and that's the reason they are all near you, and he has put the gravel there, because it's the sunny side. Upon my word, that's very clever now! I shouldn't have had half as much thought myself!"

"Mamma," said Kate, bending over her work so that her face was almost hidden, "before you were married" ——

"Dear me, Kate," interrupted Mrs. Nickleby, "what in the name of goodness graciousness makes you fly off to the time before I was married, when I'm talking to you about his thoughtfulness and attention to me? You don't seem to take the smallest interest in the garden."

"Oh! mamma," said Kate, raising her face again, "you know I do."

"Well then, my dear, why don't you praise the neatness and prettiness with which it's kept" said Mrs. Nickleby. "How very odd you are, Kate!"

"I do praise it, mamma," answered Kate, gently. "Poor fellow!"

"I scarcely ever hear you, my dear," retorted Mrs. Nickleby; "that's all I've got to say." By this time the good lady had been a long while upon one topic, so

she fell at once into her daughter's little trap — if trap it were — and inquired what she had been going to say.

"About what, mamma?" said Kate, who had apparently quite forgotten her diversion.

"Lor', Kate, my dear," returned her mother, "why, you're asleep or stupid! About the time before I was married."

"Oh yes!" said Kate, "I remember. I was going to ask, mamma, before you were married, had you many suitors?"

"Suitors, my dear!" cried Mrs. Nickleby, with a smile of wonderful complacency. "First and last, Kate, I must have had a dozen at least."

"Mamma!" returned Kate, in a tone of remonstrance.

"I had, indeed, my dear," said Mrs. Nickleby; "not including your poor papa, or a young gentleman who used to go, at that time, to the same dancing-school, and who *would* send gold watches and bracelets to our house in gilt-edged paper, (which were always returned,) and who afterwards unfortunately went out to Botany Bay in a cadet ship — a convict ship I mean — and escaped into a bush and killed sheep, (I don't know how they got there,) and was going to be hung, only he accidentally choked himself, and the government pardoned him. Then there was young Lukin," said Mrs. Nickleby, beginning with her left thumb and checking off the names on her fingers — "Mogley — Tipslark — Cabbery — Smifser" ——

Having now reached her little finger, Mrs. Nickleby was carrying the account over to the other hand, when a loud "Hem!" which appeared to come from the very foundation of the garden-wall, gave both herself and her daughter a violent start.

"Mamma! what was that?" said Kate, in a low tone of voice.

"Upon my word, my dear," returned Mrs. Nickleby, considerably startled, "unless it was the gentleman belonging to the next house, I don't know what it could possibly" ——

"A — hem!" cried the same voice; and that, not in the tone of an ordinary clearing of the throat, but in a kind of bellow, which woke up all the echoes in the neighborhood, and was prolonged to an extent which must have made the unseen bellower quite black in the face.

"I understand it now, my dear," said Mrs. Nickleby, laying her hand on Kate's; "don't be alarmed, my love, it's not directed to you, and is not intended to frighten anybody. Let us give everybody their due, Kate; I am bound to say that."

So saying, Mrs. Nickleby nodded her head, and patted the back of her daughter's hand, a great many times, and looked as if she could tell something vastly important if she chose, but had self-denial, thank Heaven; and wouldn't do it.

"What do you mean, mamma?" demanded Kate, in evident surprise.

"Don't be flurried, my dear," replied Mrs. Nickleby, looking towards the garden-wall, "for you see *I*'m not, and if it would be excusable in anybody to be flurried, it certainly would — under all the circumstances — be excusable in me, but I am not, Kate — not at all."

"It seems designed to attract our attention, mamma," said Kate.

"It *is* designed to attract our attention, my dear — at least," rejoined Mrs. Nickleby, drawing herself up, and

patting her daughter's hand more blandly than before, "to attract the attention of one of us. Hem! you needn't be at all uneasy, my dear."

Kate looked very much perplexed, and was apparently about to ask for further explanation, when a shouting and scuffling noise, as of an elderly gentleman whooping, and kicking up his legs on loose gravel, with great violence, was heard to proceed from the same direction as the former sounds; and, before they had subsided, a large cucumber was seen to shoot up in the air with the velocity of a sky-rocket, whence it descended, tumbling over and over, until it fell at Mrs. Nickleby's feet.

This remarkable appearance was succeeded by another of a precisely similar description; then a fine vegetable-marrow, of unusually large dimensions, was seen to whirl aloft, and come toppling down; then, several cucumbers shot up together; and, finally, the air was darkened by a shower of onions, turnip-radishes, and other small vegetables, which fell rolling and scattering, and bumping about, in all directions.

As Kate rose from her seat, in some alarm, and caught her mother's hand to run with her into the house, she felt herself rather retarded than assisted in her intention; and following the direction of Mrs. Nickleby's eyes, was quite terrified by the apparition of an old black velvet cap, which, by slow degrees, as if its wearer were ascending a ladder or pair of steps, rose above the wall dividing their garden from that of the next cottage, (which, like their own, was a detached building,) and was gradually followed by a very large head, and an old face, in which were a pair of most extraordinary gray eyes: very wild, very wide open, and rolling in their

sockets, with a dull, languishing, leering look, most ugly to behold.

"Mamma!" cried Kate, really terrified for the moment, "why do you stop, why do you lose an instant? — Mamma, pray come in!"

"Kate, my dear," returned her mother, still holding back, "how can you be so foolish? I'm ashamed of you. How do you suppose you are ever to get through life, if you're such a coward as this! What do you want, sir?" said Mrs. Nickleby, addressing the intruder with a sort of simpering displeasure. "How dare you look into this garden?"

"Queen of my soul," replied the stranger, folding his hands together, "this goblet sip!"

"Nonsense, sir," said Mrs. Nickleby. "Kate, my love, pray be quiet."

"Won't you sip the goblet?" urged the stranger, with his head imploringly on one side, and his right hand on his breast. "Oh, do sip the goblet!"

"I shall not consent to do anything of the kind, sir," said Mrs. Nickleby. "Pray, begone."

"Why is it," said the old gentleman, coming up a step higher, and leaning his elbows on the wall, with as much complacency as if he were looking out of window, "why is it that beauty is always obdurate, even when admiration is as honorable and respectful as mine?" Here he smiled, kissed his hand, and made several low bows. "Is it owing to the bees, who, when the honey season is over, and they are supposed to have been killed with brimstone, in reality fly to Barbary and lull the captive Moors to sleep with their drowsy songs? Or is it," he added, dropping his voice almost to a whisper, "in consequence of the statue at

Charing Cross having been lately seen, on the Stock Exchange at midnight, walking arm-in-arm with the Pump from Aldgate, in a riding-habit?"

"Mamma," murmured Kate, "do you hear him?"

"Hush, my dear!" replied Mrs. Nickleby, in the same tone of voice, "he is very polite, and I think that was a quotation from the poets. Pray, don't worry me so — you'll pinch my arm black and blue. Go away, sir!"

"Quite away?" said the gentleman, with a languishing look, "Oh! quite away?"

"Yes," returned Mrs. Nickleby, "certainly. You have no business here. This is private property, sir; you ought to know that."

"I do know," said the old gentleman, laying his finger on his nose, with an air of familiarity most reprehensible, "that this is a sacred and enchanted spot, where the most divine charms" — here he kissed his hand and bowed again — "waft mellifluousness over the neighbors' gardens, and force the fruit and vegetables into premature existence. That fact I am acquainted with. But will you permit me, fairest creature, to ask you one question, in the absence of the planet Venus, who has gone on business to the Horse Guards, and would otherwise — jealous of your superior charms — interpose between us?"

"Kate," observed Mrs. Nickleby, turning to her daughter. "it's very awkward, positively. I really don't know what to say to this gentleman. One ought to be civil, you know."

"Dear mamma," rejoined Kate, "don't say a word to him, but let us run away, as fast as we can, and shut ourselves up till Nicholas comes home."

Mrs. Nickleby looked very grand, not to say contemptuous, at this humiliating proposal; and, turning to the old gentleman, who had watched them during these whispers with absorbing eagerness, said —

"If you will conduct yourself, sir, like the gentleman I should imagine you to be, from your language and — and — appearance, (quite the counterpart of your grandpapa, Kate, my dear, in his best days,) and will put your question to me in plain words, I will answer it."

If Mrs. Nickleby's excellent papa had borne, in his best days, a resemblance to the neighbor now looking over the wall, he must have been, to say the least, a very queer-looking old gentleman in his prime. Perhaps Kate thought so, for she ventured to glance at his living portrait with some attention, as he took off his black velvet cap, and, exhibiting a perfectly bald head, made a long series of bows, each accompanied with a fresh kiss of the hand. After exhausting himself, to all appearance, with this fatiguing performance, he covered his head once more, pulled the cap very carefully over the tips of his ears, and resuming his former attitude, said,

"The question is" —

Here he broke off to look round in every direction, and satisfy himself beyond all doubt that there were no listeners near. Assured that there were not, he tapped his nose several times, accompanying the action with a cunning look, as though congratulating himself on his caution; and stretching out his neck, said in a loud whisper,

"Are you a princess?"

"You are mocking me, sir," replied Mrs. Nickleby, making a feint of retreating towards the house.

"No, but are you?" said the old gentleman.

"You know I am not, sir," replied Mrs. Nickleby.

"Then are you any relation to the Archbishop of Canterbury?" inquired the old gentleman with great anxiety, "or to the Pope of Rome? or the Speaker of the House of Commons? Forgive me, if I am wrong, but I was told you were niece to the Commissioners of Paving, and daughter-in-law to the Lord Mayor and Court of Common Council, which would account for your relationship to all three."

"Whoever has spread such reports, sir," returned Mrs. Nickleby, with some warmth, "has taken great liberties with my name, and one which I am sure my son Nicholas, if he was aware of it, would not allow for an instant. The idea!" said Mrs. Nickleby, drawing herself up, "niece to the Commissioners of Paving!"

"Pray, mamma, come away!" whispered Kate.

"'Pray, mamma!' Nonsense, Kate," said Mrs. Nickleby, angrily, "but that's just the way. If they had said I was niece to a piping bullfinch, what would you care! But I have no sympathy" — whimpered Mrs. Nickleby, "I don't expect it, that's one thing."

"Tears!" cried the old gentleman, with such an energetic jump, that he fell down two or three steps and grated his chin against the wall. "Catch the crystal globules — catch 'em — bottle 'em up — cork 'em tight — put sealing-wax on the top — seal 'em with a cupid — label 'em 'Best quality' — and stow 'em away in the fourteen bin, with a bar of iron on the top to keep the thunder off!"

Issuing these commands, as if there were a dozen attendants all actively engaged in their execution, he

turned his velvet cap inside out, put it on with great dignity so as to obscure his right eye and three fourths of his nose, and sticking his arms akimbo, looked very fiercely at a sparrow hard by, till the bird flew away, when he put his cap in his pocket with an air of great satisfaction, and addressed himself with respectful demeanor to Mrs. Nickleby.

"Beautiful madam," such were his words — "if I have made any mistake with regard to your family or connections, I humbly beseech you to pardon me. If I supposed you to be related to Foreign Powers or Native Boards, it is because you have a manner, a carriage, a dignity, which you will excuse my saying that none but yourself (with the single exception perhaps of the tragic muse, when playing extemporaneously on the barrel organ before the East India Company) can parallel. I am not a youth, ma'am, as you see; and although beings like you can never grow old, I venture to presume that we are fitted for each other."

"Really, Kate, my love!" said Mrs. Nickleby faintly, and looking another way.

"I have estates, ma'am," said the old gentleman, flourishing his right hand negligently, as if he made very light of such matters, and speaking very fast; "jewels, light-houses, fish-ponds, a whalery of my own in the North Sea, and several oyster-beds of great profit in the Pacific Ocean. If you will have the kindness to step down to the Royal Exchange and to take the cocked hat off the stoutest beadle's head, you will find my card in the lining of the crown, wrapped up in a piece of blue paper. My walking-stick is also to be seen on application to the chaplain of the House of Commons, who is strictly forbidden to take any

money for showing it. I have enemies about me, ma'am," he looked towards his house and spoke very low, "who attack me on all occasions, and wish to secure my property. If you bless me with your hand and heart, you can apply to the Lord Chancellor or call out the military if necessary — sending my toothpick to the commander-in-chief will be sufficient — and so clear the house of them before the ceremony is performed. After that, love bliss and rapture; rapture love and bliss. Be mine, be mine!"

Repeating these last words with great rapture and enthusiasm, the old gentleman put on his black velvet cap again, and looking up into the sky in a hasty manner, said something that was not quite intelligible concerning a balloon he expected, and which was rather after its time.

"Be mine, be mine!" repeated the old gentleman.

"Kate, my dear," said Mrs. Nickleby, "I have hardly the power to speak; but it is necessary for the happiness of all parties that this matter should be set at rest forever."

"Surely there is no necessity for you to say one word, mamma?" reasoned Kate.

"You will allow me, my dear, if you please, to judge for myself," said Mrs. Nickleby.

"Be mine, be mine!" cried the old gentleman.

"It can scarcely be expected, sir," said Mrs. Nickleby, fixing her eyes modestly on the ground, "that I should tell a stranger whether I feel flattered and obliged by such proposals, or not. They certainly are made under very singular circumstances; still at the same time, as far as it goes, and to a certain extent of course," (Mrs. Nickleby's customary qualification,)

"they must be gratifying and agreeable to one's feelings."

"Be mine, be mine," cried the old gentleman. "Gog and Magog, Gog and Magog. Be mine, be mine!"

"It will be sufficient for me to say, sir," resumed Mrs. Nickleby, with perfect seriousness — "and I'm sure you'll see the propriety of taking an answer and going away — that I have made up my mind to remain a widow, and to devote myself to my children. You may not suppose I am the mother of two children — indeed many people have doubted it, and said that nothing on earth could ever make 'em believe it possible — but it is the case, and they are both grown up. We shall be very glad to have you for a neighbor — very glad; delighted, I'm sure — but in any other character it's quite impossible, quite. As to my being young enough to marry again, that perhaps may be so, or it may not be; but I couldn't think of it for an instant, not on any account whatever. I said I never would, and I never will. It's a very painful thing to have to reject proposals, and I would much rather that none were made; at the same time this is the answer that I determined long ago to make, and this is the answer I shall always give."

These observations were partly addressed to the old gentleman, partly to Kate, and partly delivered in soliloquy. Towards their conclusion, the suitor evinced a very irreverent degree of inattention, and Mrs. Nickleby had scarcely finished speaking, when, to the great terror both of that lady and her daughter, he suddenly flung off his coat, and springing on the top of the wall, threw himself into an attitude which displayed his small clothes and gray worsteds to the fullest advantage, and concluded

by standing on one leg, and repeating his favorite bellow with increased vehemence.

While he was still dwelling on the last note, and embellishing it with a prolonged flourish, a dirty hand was observed to glide stealthily and swiftly along the top of the wall, as if in pursuit of a fly, and then to clasp with the utmost dexterity one of the old gentleman's ankles. This done, the companion hand appeared, and clasped the other ankle.

Thus encumbered the old gentleman lifted his legs awkwardly once or twice, as if they were very clumsy and imperfect pieces of machinery, and then looking down on his own side of the wall, burst into a loud laugh.

"It's you, is it?" said the old gentleman.

"Yes, it's me," replied a gruff voice.

"How's the Emperor of Tartary?" said the old gentleman.

"Oh! he's much the same as usual," was the reply. "No better and no worse."

"The young Prince of China," said the old gentleman, with much interest. "Is he reconciled to his father-in-law, the great potato salesman?"

"No," answered the gruff voice; "and he says he never will be, that's more."

"If that's the case," observed the old gentleman, "perhaps I'd better come down."

"Well," said the man on the other side, "I think you had, perhaps."

One of the hands being then cautiously unclasped, the old gentleman dropped into a sitting posture, and was looking round to smile and bow to Mrs. Nickleby, when he disappeared with some precipitation, as if his legs had been pulled from below.

Very much relieved by his disappearance, Kate was turning to speak to her mamma, when the dirty hands again became visible, and were immediately followed by the figure of a coarse squat man, who ascended by the steps which had been recently occupied by their singular neighbor.

"Beg your pardon, ladies," said this new-comer, grinning and touching his hat. "Has he been making love to either of you?"

"Yes," said Kate.

"Ah!" rejoined the man, taking his handkerchief out of his hat and wiping his face, "he always will, you know. Nothing will prevent his making love."

"I need not ask you if he is out of his mind, poor creature," said Kate.

"Why no," replied the man, looking into his hat, throwing his handkerchief in at one dab, and putting it on again. "That's pretty plain, that is."

"Has he been so long?" asked Kate.

"A long while."

"And is there no hope for him?" said Kate, compassionately.

"Not a bit, and don't deserve to be," replied the keeper. "He's a deal pleasanter without his senses than with 'em. He was the cruellest, wickedest, out-and-outerest old flint that ever drawed breath."

"Indeed!" said Kate.

"By George!" replied the keeper, shaking his head so emphatically that he was obliged to frown to keep his hat on, "I never come across such a vagabond, and my mate says the same. Broke his poor wife's heart, turned his daughters out of doors, drove his sons into the streets — it was a blessing he went mad at last, through evil

tempers, and covetousness, and selfishness, and guzzling, and drinking, or he'd have drove many others so. Hope for *him*, an old rip! There isn't too much hope going, but I'll bet a crown that what there is, is saved for more deserving chaps than him, anyhow."

With which confession of his faith, the keeper shook his head again, as much as to say that nothing short of this would do, if things were to go on at all; and touching his hat sulkily — not that he was in an ill-humor, but that his subject ruffled him — descended the ladder, and took it away.

During this conversation, Mrs. Nickleby had regarded the man with a severe and steadfast look. She now heaved a profound sigh, and pursing up her lips, shook her head in a slow and doubtful manner.

"Poor creature!" said Kate.

"Ah! poor indeed!" rejoined Mrs. Nickleby. "It's shameful that such things should be allowed — Shameful!"

"How can they be helped, mamma?" said Kate, mournfully. "The infirmities of nature" —

"Nature!" said Mrs. Nickleby. "What! Do *you* suppose this poor gentleman is out of his mind?"

"Can anybody who sees him entertain any other opinion, mamma?"

"Why then, I just tell you this, Kate," returned Mrs. Nickleby, "that he is nothing of the kind, and I am surprised you can be so imposed upon. It's some plot of these people to possess themselves of his property — didn't he say so himself? He may be a little odd and flighty, perhaps, many of us are that; but downright mad! and express himself as he does, respectfully, and in quite poetical language, and making offers with so

much thought, and care, and prudence — not as if he ran into the streets, and went down upon his knees to the first chit of a girl he met, as a madman would! No, no, Kate, there's a great deal too much method in *his* madness; depend upon that, my dear."

CHAPTER XLII.

ILLUSTRATIVE OF THE CONVIVIAL SENTIMENT, THAT THE BEST OF FRIENDS MUST SOMETIMES PART.

The pavement of Snow Hill had been baking and frying all day in the heat, and the twain Saracens' heads guarding the entrance to the hostlery of whose name and sign they are the duplicate presentments, looked — or seemed in the eyes of jaded and foot-sore passers-by, to look — more vicious than usual, after blistering and scorching in the sun, when, in one of the inn's smallest sitting-rooms, through whose open window there rose, in a palpable steam, wholesome exhalations from reeking coach-horses, the usual furniture of a tea-table was displayed in neat and inviting order, flanked by large joints of roast and boiled, a tongue, a pigeon-pie, a cold fowl, a tankard of ale, and other little matters of the like kind, which, in degenerate towns and cities, are generally understood to belong more particularly to solid lunches, stage-coach dinners, or unusually substantial breakfasts.

Mr. John Browdie, with his hands in his pockets, hovered restlessly about these delicacies, stopping occasionally to whisk the flies out of the sugar-basin with his wife's pocket-handkerchief, or to dip a teaspoon in the milk-pot and carry it to his mouth, or to cut off a little knob of crust, and a little corner of meat, and swallow

them at two gulps like a couple of pills. After every one of these flirtations with the eatables, he pulled out his watch, and declared with an earnestness quite pathetic that he couldn't undertake to hold out two minutes longer.

"Tilly!" said John to his lady, who was reclining half awake and half asleep upon a sofa.

"Well, John!"

"Weel, John!" retorted her husband, impatiently. "Dost thou feel hoongry, lass?"

"Not very," said Mrs. Browdie.

"Not vary!" repeated John, raising his eyes to the ceiling. "Hear her say not vary, and us dining at three, and loonching off pasthry thot aggravates a mon 'stead of pacifying him! Not vary!"

"Here's a gen'l'man for you, sir," said the waiter, looking in.

"A wa'at, for me?" cried John, as though he thought it must be a letter, or a parcel.

"A gen'l'man, sir."

"Stars and garthers, chap!" said John, "wa'at dost thou coom and say thot for. In wi' 'un."

"Are you at home, sir?"

"At whoam!" cried John, "I wish I wur; I'd ha' tea'd two hour ago. Why, I told t'oother chap to look sharp ootside door, and tell 'un d'rectly he coom, thot we war faint wi' hoonger. In wi' 'un. Aha! Thee hond, Misther Nickleby. This is nigh to be the proodest day o' my life, sir. Hoo be all wi' ye? Ding! But, I'm glod o' this!"

Quite forgetting even his hunger in the heartiness of his salutation, John Browdie shook Nicholas by the hand again and again, slapping his palm with great violence

between each shake, to add warmth to the reception.

"Ah! there she be," said John, observing the look which Nicholas directed towards his wife. "There she be — we shan't quarrel about her noo — Eh? Ecod, when I think o' thot — but thou want'st soom'at to eat. Fall to, mun, fall to, and for wa'at we're aboot to receive" ——

No doubt the grace was properly finished, but nothing more was heard, for John had already begun to play such a knife and fork, that his speech was, for the time, gone.

"I shall take the usual license, Mr. Browdie," said Nicholas, as he placed a chair for the bride.

"Tak' whatever thou like'st," said John, "and when a's gane, ca' for more."

Without stopping to explain, Nicholas kissed the blushing Mrs. Browdie, and handed her to her seat.

"I say," said John, rather astounded for the moment, "mak' theeself quite at whoam, will 'ee?"

"You may depend upon that," replied Nicholas; "on one condition."

"And wa'at may thot be?" asked John.

"That you make me a godfather the very first time you have occasion for one."

"Eh! d'ye hear thot!" cried John, laying down his knife and fork. "A godfeyther! Ha! ha! ha! Tilly — hear till 'un — a godfeyther! Divn't say a word more, ye'll never beat thot. Occasion for 'un — a godfeyther! Ha! ha! ha!"

Never was man so tickled with a respectable old joke, as John Browdie was with this. He chuckled, roared, half suffocated himself by laughing large pieces of beef

into his windpipe, roared again, persisted in eating at the same time, got red in the face and black in the forehead, coughed, cried, got better, went off again laughing inwardly, got worse, choked, had his back thumped, stamped about, frightened his wife, and at last recovered in a state of the last exhaustion and with the water streaming from his eyes, but still faintly ejaculating "A godfeyther — a godfeyther, Tilly!" in a tone bespeaking an exquisite relish of the sally, which no suffering could diminish.

"You remember the night of our first tea-drinking?" said Nicholas.

"Shall I e'er forget it, mun?" replied John Browdie.

"He was a desperate fellow that night though, was he not, Mrs. Browdie?" said Nicholas. "Quite a monster?"

"If you had only heard him as we were going home, Mr. Nickleby, you'd have said so indeed," returned the bride. "I never was so frightened in all my life."

"Coom, coom," said John, with a broad grin; "thou know'st betther than thot, Tilly."

"So I was," replied Mrs. Browdie. "I almost made up my mind never to speak to you again."

"A'most!" said John, with a broader grin than the last. "A'most made up her mind! And she wur coaxin', and coaxin', and wheedlin', and wheedlin' a' the blessed wa'. 'Wa'at didst thou let yon chap mak' oop tiv 'ee for?' says I. 'I deedn't, John,' says she, a-squeedgin' my arm. 'You deedn't,' says I. 'Noa,' says she, a-squeedgin' of me agean."

"Lor', John!" interposed his pretty wife, coloring very much. "How can you talk such nonsense? As if I should have dreamt of such a thing!"

"I dinnot know whether thou'd ever dreamt of it, though I think that's loike eneaf, mind," retorted John; "but thou didst it. 'Ye're a feeckle, changeable weathercock, lass,' says I. 'Not feeckle, John,' says she. 'Yes,' says I, 'feeckle, dom'd feeckle. Dinnot tell me thou bean't, efther yon chap at school-measther's,' says I. 'Him!' says she, quite screeching. 'Ah! him!' says I. 'Why, John,' says she — and she coom a deal closer and squeedged a deal harder than she'd deane afore — 'dost thou think it's nat'ral noo, that having such a proper mun as thou to keep company wi', I'd ever tak' oop wi' such a leetle scanty whipper-snapper as yon?' she says. Ha! ha! ha! She said whipper-snapper! 'Ecod!' I says, 'efther thot, neame the day, and let's have it ower!' Ha! ha! ha!"

Nicholas laughed very heartily at this story, both on account of its telling against himself, and his being desirous to spare the blushes of Mrs. Browdie, whose protestations were drowned in peals of laughter from her husband. His good-nature soon put her at her ease; and although she still denied the charge, she laughed so heartily at it, that Nicholas had the satisfaction of feeling assured that in all essential respects it was strictly true.

"This is the second time," said Nicholas, "that we have ever taken a meal together, and only the third I have ever seen you; and yet it really seems to me as if I were among old friends."

"Weel!" observed the Yorkshireman, "so I say."

"And I am sure I do," added his young wife.

"I have the best reason to be impressed with the feeling, mind," said Nicholas; "for if it had not been for your kindness of heart, my good friend, when I had no

right or reason to expect it, I know not what might have become of me or what plight I should have been in by this time."

"Talk aboot soom'at else," replied John, gruffly, "and dinnot bother."

"It must be a new song to the same tune then," said Nicholas, smiling. "I told you in my letter that I deeply felt and admired your sympathy with that poor lad, whom you released at the risk of involving yourself in trouble and difficulty; but I can never tell you how grateful he and I, and others whom you don't know, are to you for taking pity on him."

"Ecod!" rejoined John Browdie, drawing up his chair; "and I can never tell *you* hoo grat'ful soom folks that we do know would be loikewise, if *they* know'd I had takken pity on him."

"Ah!" exclaimed Mrs. Browdie, "what a state I was in, that night!"

"Were they at all disposed to give you credit for assisting in the escape?" inquired Nicholas of John Browdie.

"Not a bit," replied the Yorkshireman, extending his mouth from ear to ear. "There I lay, snoog in school-measther's bed long efther it was dark, and nobody coom nigh the pleace. 'Weel!' thinks I, 'he's got a pretty good start, and if he bean't whoam by noo, he never will be; so you may coom as quick as you loike, and foind us reddy'—that is, you know, school-measther might coom."

"I understand," said Nicholas.

"Presently," resumed John, "he *did* coom. I heerd door shut doon-stairs, and him a warking oop in the daark. 'Slow and steddy,' I says to myself, 'tak' your time, sir—no hurry.' He cooms to the door, turns the

key — turns the key when there warn't nothing to hoold the lock — and ca's oot 'Hallo, there!' — 'Yes,' thinks I, 'you may do thot agean, and not wakken anybody, sir.' 'Hallo, there,' he says, and then he stops. 'Thou'd betther not aggravate me,' says school-measther, efther a little time. 'I'll brak' every boan in your boddy, Smike,' he says, efther another little time. Then all of a soodden, he sings oot for a loight, and when it cooms — ecod, such a hoorly-boorly! 'Wa'at's the matter?' says I. 'He's gane,' says he, — stark mad wi' vengeance. 'Have you heerd nought?' 'Ees,' says I, 'I heerd street-door shut, no time at a' ago. I heerd a person run doon there' (pointing t'other wa' — eh?) 'Help!' he cries. 'I'll help you,' says I; and off we set — the wrong wa'! Ho! ho! ho!"

"Did you go far?" asked Nicholas.

"Far!" replied John; "I run him clean off his legs in quarther of an hoor. To see old school-measther wi'out his hat, skimming along oop to his knees in mud and wather, tumbling over fences, and rowling into ditches, and bawling oot like mad, wi' his one eye looking sharp out for the lad, and his coat-tails flying out behind, and him spattered wi' mud all ower, face and all; — I tho't I should ha' dropped doon, and killed myself wi' laughing."

John laughed so heartily at the mere recollection, that he communicated the contagion to both his hearers, and all three burst into peals of laughter, which were renewed again and again, until they could laugh no longer.

"He's a bad 'un," said John, wiping his eyes; "a very bad 'un, is school-measther."

"I can't bear the sight of him, John," said his wife.

"Coom," retorted John, "thot's tidy in you, thot is. If it wa'nt along o' you, we shouldn't know nought aboot 'un. Thou know'd 'un first, Tilly, didn't thou?"

"I couldn't help knowing Fanny Squeers, John," returned his wife; "she was an old playmate of mine, you know."

"Weel," replied John, "dean't I say so, lass? It's best to be neighborly, and keep up old acquaintance loike; and what I say is, dean't quarrel if 'ee can help it. Dinnot think so, Mr. Nickleby?"

"Certainly," returned Nicholas; "and you acted upon that principle when I met you on horseback on the road, after our memorable evening."

"Sure-ly," said John. "Wa'at I say, I stick by."

"And that's a fine thing to do, and manly too," said Nicholas, "though it's not exactly what we understand by 'coming Yorkshire over us' in London. Miss Squeers is stopping with you, you said in your note."

"Yes," replied John, "Tilly's bridesmaid; and a queer bridesmaid she be, too. She wean't be a bride in a hurry, I reckon."

"For shame, John," said Mrs. Browdie; with an acute perception of the joke though, being a bride herself.

"The groom will be a blessed mun," said John, his eyes twinkling at the idea. "He'll be in luck, he will."

"You see, Mr. Nickleby," said his wife, "that it was in consequence of her being here, that John wrote to you and fixed to-night, because we thought that it wouldn't be pleasant for you to meet, after what has passed" —

"Unquestionably. You were quite right in that," said Nicholas, interrupting.

"Especially," observed Mrs. Browdie, looking very sly, "after what we know about past and gone love-matters."

"We know, indeed!" said Nicholas, shaking his head. "You behaved rather wickedly there, I suspect."

"O' course she did," said John Browdie, passing his huge forefinger through one of his wife's pretty ringlets, and looking very proud of her. "She wur always as skittish and full o' tricks as a"——

"Well, as a what?" said his wife.

"As a woman," returned John. "Ding! But I dinnot know aught else that cooms near it."

"You were speaking about Miss Squeers," said Nicholas, with the view of stopping some slight connubialities which had begun to pass between Mr. and Mrs. Browdie, and which rendered the position of a third party in some degree embarrassing, as occasioning him to feel rather in the way than otherwise.

"Oh yes," rejoined Mrs. Browdie. "John ha' done — John fixed to-night, because she had settled that she would go and drink tea with her father. And to make quite sure of there being nothing amiss, and of your being quite alone with us, he settled to go out there and fetch her home."

"That was a very good arrangement," said Nicholas; "though I am sorry to be the occasion of so much trouble."

"Not the least in the world," returned Mrs. Browdie; "for we have looked forward to seeing you — John and I have — with the greatest possible pleasure. Do you know, Mr. Nickleby," said Mrs. Browdie, with her archest smile, "that I really think Fanny Squeers was very fond of you?"

"I am very much obliged to her," said Nicholas; "but, upon my word, I never aspired to making any impression upon her virgin heart."

"How you talk!" tittered Mrs. Browdie. "No, but do you know that really — seriously now and without any joking — I was given to understand by Fanny herself, that you had made an offer to her, and that you two were going to be engaged quite solemn and regular."

"Was you, ma'am — was you?" cried a shrill female voice, "was you given to understand that I — I — was going to be engaged to an assassinating thief that shed the gore of my pa? Do you — do you think, ma'am — that I was very fond of such dirt beneath my feet, as I couldn't condescend to touch with kitchen tongs, without blacking and crocking myself by the contract? Do you, ma'am — do you? Oh! base and degrading 'Tilda!"

With these reproaches Miss Squeers flung the door wide open, and disclosed to the eyes of the astonished Browdies and Nicholas, not only her own symmetrical form, arrayed in the chaste white garments before described, (a little dirtier,) but the form of her brother and father, the pair of Wackfords.

"This is the hend, is it?" continued Miss Squeers, who, being excited, aspirated her h's strongly; "this is the hend, is it, of all my forbearance and friendship for that double-faced thing — that viper, that — that — mermaid?" (Miss Squeers hesitated a long time for this last epithet, and brought it out triumphantly at last, as if it quite clinched the business.) "This is the hend, is it, of all my bearing with her deceitfulness, her lowness, her falseness, her laying herself out to catch the admiration of vulgar minds, in a way which made me blush for my — for my" ——

"Gender," suggested Mr. Squeers, regarding the spectators with a malevolent eye — literally *a* malevolent eye.

"Yes," said Miss Squeers; "but I thank my stars that my ma' is of the same" ——

"Hear, hear!" remarked Mr. Squeers; "and I wish she was here to have a scratch at this company."

"This is the hend, is it," said Miss Squeers, tossing her head, and looking contemptuously at the floor, "of my taking notice of that rubbishing creature, and demeaning myself to patronize her?"

"Oh, come," rejoined Mrs. Browdie, disregarding all the endeavors of her spouse to restrain her, and forcing herself into a front row, "don't talk such nonsense as that."

"Have I not patronized you, ma'am?" demanded Miss Squeers.

"No," returned Mrs. Browdie.

"I will not look for blushes in such a quarter," said Miss Squeers, haughtily, "for that countenance is a stranger to everything but hignominiousness and red-faced boldness."

"I say," interposed John Browdie, nettled by these accumulated attacks on his wife, "dra' it mild, dra' it mild."

"You, Mr. Browdie," said Miss Squeers, taking him up very quickly, "I pity. I have no feeling for you, sir, but one of unliquidated pity."

"Oh!" said John.

"No," said Miss Squeers, looking sideways at her parent, "although I *am* a queer bridesmaid, and *shan't* be a bride in a hurry, and although my husband *will* be in luck, I entertain no sentiments towards you, sir, but sentiments of pity."

Here Miss Squeers looked sideways at her father again, who looked sideways at her, as much as to say, "There you had him."

"*I* know what you've got to go through," said Miss Squeers, shaking her curls violently. "*I* know what life is before you, and if you was my bitterest and deadliest enemy, I could wish you nothing worse."

"Couldn't you wish to be married to him yourself, if that was the case?" inquired Mrs. Browdie, with great suavity of manner.

"Oh, ma'am, how witty you are," retorted Miss Squeers with a low courtesy, "almost as witty, ma'am, as you are clever. How very clever it was in you, ma'am, to choose a time when I had gone to tea with my pa', and was sure not to come back without being fetched! What a pity you never thought that other people might be as clever as yourself and spoil your plans!"

"You won't vex me, child, with such airs as these," said the late Miss Price, assuming the matron.

"Don't *Missis* me, ma'am, if you please," returned Miss Squeers, sharply. "I'll not bear it. Is *this* the hend"——

"Dang it a'," cried John Browdie, impatiently. "Say thee say out, Fanny, and mak' sure it's the end, and din-not ask nobody whether it is or not."

"Thanking you for your advice which was not required, Mr. Browdie," returned Miss Squeers, with laborious politeness, "have the goodness not to presume to meddle with my Christian name. Even my pity shall never make me forget what's due to myself, Mr. Browdie. 'Tilda," said Miss Squeers, with such a sudden accession of violence that John started in his boots, "I

throw you off forever, Miss. I abandon you. I renounce you. I wouldn't," cried Miss Squeers in a solemn voice, "have a child named 'Tilda — not to save it from its grave."

"As for the matther o' that," observed John, "it'll be time eneaf to think aboot neaming of it when it cooms."

"John!" interposed his wife, "don't tease her."

"Oh! Tease, indeed!" cried Miss Squeers, bridling up. "Tease, indeed! He, he! Tease, too! No, don't tease her. Consider her feelings, pray!"

"If it's fated that listeners are never to hear any good of themselves," said Mrs. Browdie, "I can't help it, and I am very sorry for it. But I will say, Fanny, that times out of number I have spoken so kindly of you behind your back, that even you could have found no fault with what I said."

"Oh, I dare say not, ma'am!" cried Miss Squeers, with another courtesy. "Best thanks to you for your goodness, and begging and praying you not to be hard upon me another time!"

"I don't know," resumed Mrs. Browdie, "that I have said anything very bad of you, even now — at all events, what I did say was quite true; but if I have, I am very sorry for it, and I beg your pardon. You have said much worse of me, scores of times, Fanny; but I have never borne any malice to you, and I hope you'll not bear any to me."

Miss Squeers made no more direct reply than surveying her former friend from top to toe, and elevating her nose in the air with ineffable disdain. But some indistinct allusions to a "puss," and a "minx," and a "contemptible creature," escaped her; and this, together with a severe biting of the lips, great difficulty in swallowing,

and very frequent comings and goings of breath, seemed to imply that feelings were swelling in Miss Squeers's bosom too great for utterance.

While the foregoing conversation was proceeding, Master Wackford, finding himself unnoticed, and feeling his preponderating inclinations strong upon him, had by little and little sidled up to the table and attacked the food with such slight skirmishing as drawing his fingers round and round the inside of the plates, and afterwards sucking them with infinite relish — picking the bread, and dragging the pieces over the surface of the butter — pocketing lumps of sugar, pretending all the time to be absorbed in thought — and so forth. Finding that no interference was attempted with these small liberties, he gradually mounted to greater, and, after helping himself to a moderately good cold collation, was, by this time, deep in the pie.

Nothing of this had been unobserved by Mr. Squeers, who, so long as the attention of the company was fixed upon other objects, hugged himself to think that his son and heir should be fattening at the enemy's expense. But there being now an appearance of a temporary calm, in which the proceedings of little Wackford could scarcely fail to be observed, he feigned to be aware of the circumstance for the first time, and inflicted upon the face of that young gentleman a slap that made the very teacups ring.

"Eating!" cried Mr. Squeers, "of what his father's enemies has left! It's fit to go and poison you, you unnat'ral boy."

"It wean't hurt him," said John, apparently very much relieved by the prospect of having a man in the quarrel; "let 'un eat. I wish the whole school was

here. I'd give 'em soom'ut to stay their unfort'nate stomachs, wi', if I spent the last penny I had!"

Squeers scowled at him with the worst and most malicious expression of which his face was capable — it was a face of remarkable capability, too, in that way — and shook his fist stealthily.

"Coom, coom, school-measther," said John, "dinnot make a fool o' thyself; for if I was to sheake mine — only once — thou'd fa' doon wi' the wind o' it."

"It was you, was it," returned Squeers, "that helped off my runaway boy? It was you, was it?"

"Me!" returned John, in a loud tone. "Yes, it wa' me, coom; wa'at o' that! It wa' me. Noo then!"

"You hear him say he did it, my child!" said Squeers, appealing to his daughter. "You hear him say he did it!"

"Did it!" cried John. "I'll tell 'ee more; hear this, too. If thou'd get another roonaway boy, I'd do it agean. If thou'd got twonty roonaway boys, I'd do it twonty times ower, and twonty more to thot; and I tell thee more," said John, "noo my blood is oop, that thou'rt an old ra'ascal; and that it's weel for thou, thou be'st an old 'un, or I'd ha' poonded thee to flour, when thou told an honest mun hoo' thou'd licked that poor chap in t' coorch."

"An honest man!" cried Squeers, with a sneer.

"Ah! an honest man," replied John; "honest in aught but ever putting legs under seame table wi' such as thou."

"Scandal!" said Squeers, exultingly. "Two witnesses to it; Wackford knows the nature of an oath, he does — we shall have you there, sir. Rascal, eh?" Mr. Squeers took out his pocket-book and made a note

of it. "Very good. I should say that was worth full twenty pound at the next assizes, without the honesty, sir."

"'Soizes," cried John, "thou'd betther not talk to me o' 'Soizes. Yorkshire schools have been shown up at 'Soizes afore noo, mun, and it's a ticklish soobjact to revive, I can tell ye."

Mr. Squeers shook his head in a threatening manner, looking very white with passion; and taking his daughter's arm, and dragging little Wackford by the hand, retreated towards the door.

"As for you," said Squeers, turning round and addressing Nicholas, who, as he had caused him to smart pretty soundly on a former occasion, purposely abstained from taking any part in the discussion, "see if I a'n't down upon you before long. You'll go a-kidnapping of boys, will you? Take care their fathers don't turn up — mark that — take care their fathers don't turn up, and send 'em back to me to do as I like with, in spite of you."

"I am not afraid of that," replied Nicholas, shrugging his shoulders contemptuously, and turning away.

"A'n't you!" retorted Squeers, with a diabolical look. "Now then, come along."

"I leave such society, with my pa', for*h*ever," said Miss Squeers, looking contemptuously and loftily round. "I am defiled by breathing the air with such creatures. Poor Mr. Browdie! He! he! he! I do pity him, that I do; he's so deluded! He! he! he!—— Artful and designing 'Tilda!"

With this sudden relapse into the sternest and most majestic wrath, Miss Squeers swept from the room; and having sustained her dignity until the last possible mo-

ment, was heard to sob and scream and struggle in the passage.

John Browdie remained standing behind the table, looking from his wife to Nicholas, and back again, with his mouth wide open, until his hand accidentally fell upon the tankard of ale, when he took it up, and having obscured his features therewith for some time, drew a long breath, handed it over to Nicholas, and rang the bell.

"Here, waither," said John, briskly. "Look alive here. Tak' these things awa', and let's have soomat broiled for sooper — vary comfortable and plenty o' it — at ten o'clock. Bring soom brandy and soom wather, and a pair o' slippers — the largest pair in the house — and be quick aboot it. Dash ma' wig!" said John, rubbing his hands, "there's no ganging oot to-neeght, noo, to fetch anybody whoam, and ecod, we'll begin to spend the evening in airnest."

CHAPTER XLIII.

OFFICIATES AS A KIND OF GENTLEMAN USHER, IN BRINGING VARIOUS PEOPLE TOGETHER.

The storm had long given place to a calm the most profound, and the evening was pretty far advanced — indeed supper was over, and the process of digestion proceeding as favorably as, under the influence of complete tranquillity, cheerful conversation, and a moderate allowance of brandy and water, most wise men conversant with the anatomy and functions of the human frame will consider that it ought to have proceeded, when the three friends, or as one might say, both in a civil and religious sense, and with proper deference and regard to the holy state of matrimony, the two friends, (Mr. and Mrs. Browdie counting as no more than one,) were startled by the noise of loud and angry threatenings below-stairs, which presently attained so high a pitch, and were conveyed besides in language so towering, sanguinary and ferocious, that it could hardly have been surpassed, if there had actually been a Saracen's head then present in the establishment, supported on the shoulders and surmounting the trunk of a real, live, furious, and most unappeasable Saracen.

This turmoil, instead of quickly subsiding after the first outburst, (as turmoils not unfrequently do, whether

in taverns, legislative assemblies, or elsewhere,) into a mere grumbling and growling squabble, increased every moment; and although the whole din appeared to be raised by but one pair of lungs, yet that one pair was of so powerful a quality, and repeated such words as "scoundrel," "rascal," "insolent puppy," and a variety of expletives no less flattering to the party addressed, with such great relish and strength of tone, that a dozen voices raised in concert under any ordinary circumstances would have made far less uproar and created much smaller consternation.

"Why, what's the matter?" said Nicholas, moving hastily towards the door.

John Browdie was striding in the same direction when Mrs. Browdie turned pale, and, leaning back in her chair, requested him with a faint voice to take notice, that if he ran into any danger it was her intention to fall into hysterics immediately, and that the consequences might be more serious than he thought for. John looked rather disconcerted by this intelligence, though there was a lurking grin on his face at the same time: but, being quite unable to keep out of the fray, he compromised the matter by tucking his wife's arm under his own, and, thus accompanied, following Nicholas down-stairs with all speed.

The passage outside the coffee-room door was the scene of disturbance, and here were congregated the coffee-room customers and waiters, together with two or three coachmen and helpers from the yard. These had hastily assembled round a young man who from his appearance might have been a year or two older than Nicholas, and who, besides having given utterance to the defiances just now described, seemed to have proceeded

to even greater lengths in his indignation, inasmuch as his feet had no other covering than a pair of stockings, while a couple of slippers lay at no great distance from the head of a prostrate figure in an opposite corner, who bore the appearance of having been shot into his present retreat by means of a kick, and complimented by having the slippers flung about his ears afterwards.

The coffee-room customers, and the waiters, and the coachmen, and the helpers — not to mention a bar-maid who was looking on from behind an open sash-window — seemed at that moment, if a spectator might judge from their winks, nods, and muttered exclamations, strongly disposed to take part against the young gentleman in the stockings. Observing this, and that the young gentleman was nearly of his own age and had in nothing the appearance of an habitual brawler, Nicholas, impelled by such feelings as will influence young men sometimes, felt a very strong disposition to side with the weaker party, and so thrust himself at once into the centre of the group, and in a more emphatic tone, perhaps, than circumstances might seem to warrant, demanded what all that noise was about.

"Hallo!" said one of the men from the yard, "this is somebody in disguise, this is."

"Room for the eldest son of the Emperor of Roosher, gen'l'men!" cried another fellow.

Disregarding these sallies, which were uncommonly well received, as sallies at the expense of the best-dressed persons in a crowd usually are, Nicholas glanced carelessly round, and addressing the young gentleman, who had by this time picked up his slippers and thrust his feet into them, repeated his inquiries with a courteous air.

"A mere nothing!" he replied.

At this a murmur was raised by the lookers-on, and some of the boldest cried, "Oh, indeed!—Wasn't it though?—Nothing, eh?—He called that nothing, did he? Lucky for him if he found it nothing." These and many other expressions of ironical disapprobation having been exhausted, two or three of the out-of-door fellows began to hustle Nicholas and the young gentleman who had made the noise: stumbling against them by accident, and treading on their toes, and so forth. But this being a round game, and one not necessarily limited to three or four players, was open to John Browdie too, who, bursting into the little crowd—to the great terror of his wife—and falling about in all directions, now to the right, now to the left, now forwards, now backwards, and accidentally driving his elbow through the hat of the tallest helper, who had been particularly active, speedily caused the odds to wear a very different appearance; while more than one stout fellow limped away to a respectful distance, anathematizing with tears in his eyes the heavy tread and ponderous feet of the burly Yorkshireman.

"Let me see him do it again," said he who had been kicked into the corner, rising as he spoke, apparently more from the fear of John Browdie's inadvertently treading upon him, than from any desire to place himself on equal terms with his late adversary. "Let me see him do it again. That's all."

"Let me hear you make those remarks again," said the young man, "and I'll knock that head of yours in among the wineglasses behind you there."

Here a waiter who had been rubbing his hands in excessive enjoyment of the scene, so long as only the

breaking of heads was in question, adjured the spectators with great earnestness to fetch the police, declaring that otherwise murder would be surely done, and that he was responsible for all the glass and china on the premises.

"No one need trouble himself to stir," said the young gentleman, "I am going to remain in the house all night, and shall be found here in the morning if there is any assault to answer for."

"What did you strike him for?" asked one of the bystanders.

"Ah! what did you strike him for?" demanded the others.

The unpopular gentleman looked coolly round, and addressing himself to Nicholas, said: —

"You inquired just now what was the matter here. The matter is simply this. Yonder person, who was drinking with a friend in the coffee-room when I took my seat there for half an hour before going to bed, (for I have just come off a journey, and preferred stopping here to-night, to going home at this hour, where I was not expected until to-morrow,) chose to express himself in very disrespectful, and insolently familiar terms, of a young lady, whom I recognized from his description and other circumstances, and whom I have the honor to know. As he spoke loud enough to be overheard by the other guests who were present, I informed him most civilly that he was mistaken in his conjectures, which were of an offensive nature, and requested him to forbear. He did so for a little time, but as he chose to renew his conversation when leaving the room, in a more offensive strain than before, I could not refrain from making after him, and facilitating his departure by a

kick, which reduced him to the posture in which you saw him just now. I am the best judge of my own affairs, I take it," said the young man, who had certainly not quite recovered from his recent heat, "if anybody here thinks proper to make this quarrel his own, I have not the smallest earthly objection, I do assure him."

Of all possible courses of proceeding under the circumstances detailed, there was certainly not one which, in his then state of mind, could have appeared more laudable to Nicholas than this. There were not many subjects of dispute which at that moment could have come home to his own breast more powerfully, for having the unknown uppermost in his thoughts, it naturally occurred to him that he would have done just the same if any audacious gossiper durst have presumed in his hearing to speak lightly of her. Influenced by these considerations, he espoused the young gentleman's quarrel with great warmth, protesting that he had done quite right, and that he respected him for it; which John Browdie (albeit not quite clear as to the merits) immediately protested too, with not inferior vehemence.

"Let him take care, that's all," said the defeated party, who was being rubbed down by a waiter, after his recent fall on the dusty boards. "He don't knock me about for nothing, I can tell him that. A pretty state of things, if a man isn't to admire a handsome girl without being beat to pieces for it!"

This reflection appeared to have great weight with the young lady in the bar, who (adjusting her cap as she spoke, and glancing at a mirror) declared that it would be a very pretty state of things indeed; and that if people were to be punished for actions so innocent and natural as that, there would be more people to be

knocked down than there would be people to knock them down, and that she wondered what the gentleman meant by it, that she did.

"My dear girl," said the young gentleman in a low voice, advancing towards the sash-window.

"Nonsense, sir!" replied the young lady sharply smiling though as she turned aside, and biting her lip, (whereat Mrs. Browdie, who was still standing on the stairs, glanced at her with disdain, and called to her husband to come away).

"No, but listen to me," said the young man. "If admiration of a pretty face were criminal, I should be the most hopeless person alive, for I cannot resist one. It has the most extraordinary effect upon me, checks and controls me in the most furious and obstinate mood. You see what an effect yours has had upon me already."

"Oh, that's very pretty," replied the young lady, tossing her head, "but" —

"Yes, I know it's very pretty," said the young man, looking with an air of admiration in the bar-maid's face, "I said so, you know, just this moment. But beauty should be spoken of respectfully — respectfully, and in proper terms, and with a becoming sense of its worth and excellence, whereas this fellow has no more notion"——

The young lady interrupted the conversation at this point, by thrusting her head out of the bar-window, and inquiring of the waiter in a shrill voice whether that young man who had been knocked down was going to stand in the passage all night, or whether the entrance was to be left clear for other people. The waiters taking the hint, and communicating it to the hostlers, were not slow to change their tone too, and the result was,

that the unfortunate victim was bundled out in a twinkling.

"I am sure I have seen that fellow before," said Nicholas.

"Indeed!" replied his new acquaintance.

"I am certain of it," said Nicholas, pausing to reflect. "Where can I have — stop! — yes, to be sure — he belongs to a register-office up at the west end of the town. I knew I recollected the face."

It was, indeed, Tom — the ugly clerk.

"That's odd enough!" said Nicholas, ruminating upon the strange manner in which that register-office seemed to start up and stare him in the face every now and then, and when he least expected it.

"I am much obliged to you for your kind advocacy of my cause when it most needed an advocate," said the young man, laughing, and drawing a card from his pocket. "Perhaps you'll do me the favor to let me know where I can thank you."

Nicholas took the card, and glancing at it involuntarily as he returned the compliment, evinced very great surprise.

"Mr. Frank Cheeryble!" said Nicholas. "Surely not the nephew of Cheeryble Brothers, who is expected to-morrow!"

"I don't usually call myself the nephew of the firm," returned Mr. Frank, good-humoredly; "but of the two excellent individuals who compose it, I am proud to say I *am* the nephew. And you, I see, are Mr. Nickleby, of whom I have heard so much! This is a most unexpected meeting, but not the less welcome, I assure you."

Nicholas responded to these compliments with others

of the same kind, and they shook hands warmly. Then he introduced John Browdie, who had remained in a state of great admiration ever since the young lady in the bar had been so skilfully won over to the right side. Then Mrs. John Browdie was introduced, and finally they all went up-stairs together and spent the next half-hour with great satisfaction and mutual entertainment; Mrs. John Browdie beginning the conversation by declaring that of all the made-up things she ever saw, that young woman below-stairs was the vainest and the plainest.

This Mr. Frank Cheeryble, although, to judge from what had recently taken place, a hot-headed young man, (which is not an absolute miracle and phenomenon in nature) was a sprightly, good-humored, pleasant fellow, with much both in his countenance and disposition that reminded Nicholas very strongly of the kind-hearted brothers. His manner was as unaffected as theirs, and his demeanor full of that heartiness which, to most people who have anything generous in their composition, is peculiarly prepossessing. Add to this, that he was good-looking and intelligent, had a plentiful share of vivacity, was extremely cheerful, and accommodated himself in five minutes' time to all John Browdie's oddities with as much ease as if he had known him from a boy; and it will be a source of no great wonder that, when they parted for the night, he had produced a most favorable impression, not only upon the worthy Yorkshireman and his wife, but upon Nicholas also, who, revolving all these things in his mind as he made the best of his way home, arrived at the conclusion that he had laid the foundation of a most agreeable and desirable acquaintance.

"But it's a most extraordinary thing about that register-office fellow!" thought Nicholas. "Is it likely that this nephew can know anything about that beautiful girl? When Tim Linkinwater gave me to understand the other day that he was coming to take a share in the business here, he said he had been superintending it in Germany for four years, and that during the last six months he had been engaged in establishing an agency in the north of England. That's four years and a half — four years and a half. She can't be more than seventeen — say eighteen at the outside. She was quite a child when he went away, then. I should say he knew nothing about her and had never seen her, so *he* can give me no information. At all events," thought Nicholas, coming to the real point in his mind, "there can be no danger of any prior occupation of her affections in that quarter; that's quite clear."

Is selfishness a necessary ingredient in the composition of that passion called love, or does it deserve all the fine things which poets, in the exercise of their undoubted vocation, have said of it? There are, no doubt, authenticated instances of gentlemen having given up ladies and ladies having given up gentlemen to meritorious rivals, under circumstances of great high-mindedness; but is it quite established that the majority of such ladies and gentlemen have not made a virtue of necessity, and nobly resigned what was beyond their reach; as a private soldier might register a vow never to accept the order of the Garter, or a poor curate of great piety and learning, but of no family — save a very large family of children — might renounce a bishopric?

Here was Nicholas Nickleby, who would have scorned the thought of counting how the chances stood of his rising in favor or fortune with the Brothers Cheeryble, now that their nephew had returned, already deep in calculations whether that same nephew was likely to rival him in the affections of the fair unknown — discussing the matter with himself too, as gravely as if, with that one exception, it were all settled; and recurring to the subject again and again, and feeling quite indignant and ill-used at the notion of anybody else making love to one with whom he had never exchanged a word in all his life. To be sure, he exaggerated rather than depreciated the merits of his new acquaintance; but still he took it as a kind of personal offence that he should have any merits at all — in the eyes of this particular young lady, that is; for elsewhere he was quite welcome to have as many as he pleased. There was undoubted selfishness in all this, and yet Nicholas was of a most free and generous nature, with as few mean or sordid thoughts, perhaps, as ever fell to the lot of any man; and there is no reason to suppose that, being in love, he felt and thought differently from other people in the like sublime condition.

He did not stop to set on foot an inquiry into his train of thought or state of feeling, however; but went thinking on all the way home, and continued to dream on in the same strain all night. For, having satisfied himself that Frank Cheeryble could have no knowledge of, or acquaintance with the mysterious young lady, it began to occur to him that even he himself might never see her again; upon which hypothesis he built up a very ingenious succession of tormenting ideas which answered

his purpose even better than the vision of Mr. Frank Cheeryble, and tantalized and worried him, waking and sleeping.

Notwithstanding all that has been said and sung to the contrary, there is no well-established case of morning having either deferred or hastened its approach by the term of an hour or so for the mere gratification of a splenetic feeling against some unoffending lover: the sun having, in the discharge of his public duty, as the books of precedent report, invariably risen according to the almanacs, and without suffering himself to be swayed by any private considerations. So, morning came as usual and with it business hours, and with them Mr. Frank Cheeryble, and with him a long train of smiles and welcomes from the worthy brothers, and a more grave and clerk-like, but scarcely less hearty reception from Mr. Timothy Linkinwater.

"That Mr. Frank and Mr. Nickleby should have met last night," said Tim Linkinwater, getting slowly off his stool, and looking round the counting-house with his back planted against the desk, as was his custom when he had anything very particular to say — "that those two young men should have met last night in that manner is, I say, a coincidence — a remarkable coincidence. Why, I don't believe now," added Tim, taking off his spectacles, and smiling as with gentle pride, "that there's such a place in all the world for coincidences as London is!"

"I don't know about that," said Mr. Frank; "but"——

"Don't know about it, Mr. Francis!" interrupted Tim, with an obstinate air. "Well, but let us know. If there is any better place for such things, where is

it? Is it in Europe? No, that it isn't. Is it in Asia? Why, of course it's not. Is it in Africa? Not a bit of it. Is it in America? *You* know better than that, at all events. Well, then," said Tim, folding his arms resolutely, "where is it?"

"I was not about to dispute the point, Tim," said young Cheeryble, laughing. "I am not such a heretic as that. All I was going to say was, that I hold myself under an obligation to the coincidence, that's all."

"Oh! if you don't dispute it," said Tim, quite satisfied, "that's another thing. I'll tell you what though — I wish you had. I wish you or anybody would. I would so put that man down," said Tim, tapping the forefinger of his left hand emphatically with his spectacles, "so put that man down by argument" ——

It was quite impossible to find language to express the degree of mental prostration to which such an adventurous wight would be reduced in the keen encounter with Tim Linkinwater, so Tim gave up the rest of his declaration in pure lack of words, and mounted his stool again.

"We may consider ourselves, brother Ned," said Charles, after he had patted Tim Linkinwater approvingly on the back, "very fortunate in having two such young men about us as our nephew Frank and Mr. Nickleby. It should be a source of great satisfaction and pleasure to us."

"Certainly, Charles, certainly," returned the other.

"Of Tim," added brother Ned, "I say nothing whatever, because Tim is a mere child — an infant — a nobody — that we never think of nor take into account at all. Tim, you villain, what do you say to that, sir?"

"I am jealous of both of 'em," said Tim, "and mean

to look out for another situation ; so provide yourselves, gentlemen, if you please."

Tim thought this such an exquisite, unparalleled, and most extraordinary joke, that he laid his pen upon the inkstand, and rather tumbling off his stool than getting down with his usual deliberation, laughed till he was quite faint, shaking his head all the time so that little particles of powder flew palpably about the office. Nor were the brothers at all behindhand, for they laughed almost as heartily at the ludicrous idea of any voluntary separation between themselves and old Tim. Nicholas and Mr. Frank laughed quite boisterously, perhaps to conceal some other emotion awakened by this little incident, (and, so indeed, did the three old fellows after the first burst,) so perhaps there was as much keen enjoyment and relish in that laugh altogether, as the politest assembly ever derived from the most poignant witticism uttered at any one person's expense.

" Mr. Nickleby," said brother Charles, calling him aside, and taking him kindly by the hand, " I — I — am anxious, my dear sir, to see that you are properly and comfortably settled in the cottage. We cannot allow those who serve us well to labor under any privation or discomfort that it is in our power to remove. I wish, too, to see your mother and sister, — to know them, Mr. Nickleby, and have an opportunity of relieving their minds by assuring them that any trifling service we have been able to do them is a great deal more than repaid by the zeal and ardor you display. — Not a word, my dear sir, I beg. To-morrow is Sunday. I shall make bold to come out at tea-time, and take the chance of finding you at home ; if you are not, you know, or the ladies should feel a delicacy in being in-

truded on, and would rather not be known to me just now, why I can come again another time, any other time would do for me. Let it remain upon that understanding. Brother Ned, my dear fellow, let me have a word with you this way."

The twins went out of the office arm in arm, and Nicholas, who saw in this act of kindness, and many others of which he had been the subject that morning, only so many delicate renewals on the arrival of their nephew of the kind assurances which the brothers had given him in his absence, could scarcely feel sufficient admiration and gratitude for such extraordinary consideration.

The intelligence that they were to have a visitor — and such a visitor — next day, awakened in the breast of Mrs. Nickleby mingled feelings of exultation and regret; for whereas on the one hand she hailed it as an omen of her speedy restoration to good society and the almost-forgotten pleasures of morning calls and evening tea-drinkings, she could not, on the other, but reflect with bitterness of spirit on the absence of a silver teapot with an ivory knob on the lid, and a milk-jug to match, which had been the pride of her heart in days of yore, and had been kept from year's end to year's end wrapped up in wash-leather on a certain top shelf which now presented itself in lively colors to her sorrowing imagination.

"I wonder who's got that spice-box," said Mrs. Nickleby, shaking her head. "It used to stand in the left-hand corner, next but two to the pickled onions. You remember that spice-box, Kate?"

"Perfectly well, mamma."

"I shouldn't think you did, Kate," returned Mrs.

Nickleby, in a severe manner, "talking about it in that cold and unfeeling way! If there is any one thing that vexes me in these losses more than the losses themselves, I do protest and declare," said Mrs. Nickleby, rubbing her nose with an impassioned air, "that it is to have people about me who take things with such provoking calmness."

"My dear mamma," said Kate, stealing her arm round her mother's neck, "why do you say what I know you cannot seriously mean or think, or why be angry with me for being happy and content? You and Nicholas are left to me, we are together once again, and what regard can I have for a few trifling things of which we never feel the want? When I have seen all the misery and desolation that death can bring, and known the lonesome feeling of being solitary and alone in crowds, and all the agony of separation in grief and poverty when we most needed comfort and support from each other, can you wonder that I look upon this as a place of such delicious quiet and rest, that with you beside me I have nothing to wish for or regret? There was a time, and not long since, when all the comforts of our old home did come back upon me, I own, very often — oftener than you would think perhaps — but I affected to care nothing for them, in the hope that you would so be brought to regret them less. I was not insensible, indeed. I might have felt happier if I had been. Dear mamma," said Kate, in great agitation, "I know no difference between this home and that in which we were all so happy for so many years, except that the kindest and gentlest heart that ever ached on earth has passed in peace to heaven."

"Kate my dear, Kate," cried Mrs. Nickleby, folding her in her arms.

"I have so often thought," sobbed Kate, "of all his kind words — of the last time he looked into my little room, as he passed up-stairs to bed, and said 'God bless you, darling.' There was a paleness in his face, mamma — the broken heart — I know it was — I little thought so — then" —

A gush of tears came to her relief, and Kate laid her head upon her mother's breast, and wept like a little child.

It is an exquisite and beautiful thing in our nature, that when the heart is touched and softened by some tranquil happiness or affectionate feeling, the memory of the dead comes over it most powerfully and irresistibly. It would almost seem as though our better thoughts and sympathies were charms, in virtue of which the soul is enabled to hold some vague and mysterious intercourse with the spirits of those whom we dearly loved in life. Alas! how often and how long may those patient angels hover above us, watching for the spell which is so seldom uttered, and so soon forgotten!

Poor Mrs. Nickleby, accustomed to give ready utterance to whatever came uppermost in her mind, had never conceived the possibility of her daughter's dwelling upon these thoughts in secret, the more especially as no hard trial or querulous reproach had ever drawn them from her. But now, when the happiness of all that Nicholas had just told them, and of their new and peaceful life, brought these recollections so strongly upon Kate that she could not suppress them, Mrs. Nickleby began to have a glimmering that she had been rather thoughtless now and then, and was conscious of something like self-reproach as she embraced her daughter, and yielded to the emotions which such a conversation naturally awakened.

There was a mighty bustle that night, and a vast quantity of preparation for the expected visitor, and a very large nosegay was brought from a gardener's hard by and cut up into a number of very small ones with which Mrs. Nickleby would have garnished the little sitting-room, in a style that certainly could not have failed to attract anybody's attention, if Kate had not offered to spare her the trouble, and arranged them in the prettiest and neatest manner possible. If the cottage ever looked pretty, it must have been on such a bright and sunshiny day as the next day was. But Smike's pride in the garden, or Mrs. Nickleby's in the condition of the furniture, or Kate's in everything, was nothing to the pride with which Nicholas looked at Kate herself; and surely the costliest mansion in all England might have found in her beautiful face and graceful form its most exquisite and peerless ornament.

About six o'clock in the afternoon Mrs. Nickleby was thrown into a great flutter of spirits by the long-expected knock at the door, nor was this flutter at all composed by the audible tread of two pairs of boots in the passage, which Mrs. Nickleby augured, in a breathless state, must be "the two Mr. Cheerybles;" as it certainly was, though not the two Mrs. Nickleby expected, because it was Mr. Charles Cheeryble, and his nephew, Mr. Frank, who made a thousand apologies for his intrusion, which Mrs. Nickleby (having teaspoons enough and to spare for all) most graciously received. Nor did the appearance of this unexpected visitor occasion the least embarrassment, (save in Kate, and that only to the extent of a blush or two at first,) for the old gentleman was so kind and cordial, and the young gentleman imitated him in this respect so well, that the usual stiffness

and formality of a first meeting showed no signs of appearing, and Kate really more than once detected herself in the very act of wondering when it was going to begin.

At the tea-table there was plenty of conversation on a great variety of subjects, nor were there wanting jocose matters of discussion, such as they were; for young Mr. Cheeryble's recent stay in Germany happening to be alluded to, old Mr. Cheeryble informed the company that the aforesaid young Mr. Cheeryble was suspected to have fallen deeply in love with the daughter of a certain German burgomaster. This accusation young Mr. Cheeryble most indignantly repelled, upon which Mrs. Nickleby slyly remarked, that she suspected, from the very warmth of the denial, there must be something in it. Young Mr. Cheeryble then earnestly entreated old Mr. Cheeryble to confess that it was all a jest, which old Mr. Cheeryble at last did, young Mr. Cheeryble being so much in earnest about it, that — as Mrs. Nickleby said many thousand times afterwards in recalling the scene — he "quite colored," which she rightly considered a memorable circumstance, and one worthy of remark, young men not being as a class remarkable for modesty or self-denial, especially when there is a lady in the case, when, if they color at all, it is rather their practice to color the story, and not themselves.

After tea there was a walk in the garden, and the evening being very fine they strolled out of the garden-gate into some lanes and by-roads, and sauntered up and down until it grew quite dark. The time seemed to pass very quickly with all the party. Kate went first, leaning upon her brother's arm, and talking with him and Mr. Frank Cheeryble; and Mrs. Nickleby and the

elder gentleman followed at a short distance, the kindness of the good merchant, his interest in the welfare of Nicholas, and his admiration of Kate, so operating upon the good lady's feelings, that the usual current of her speech was confined within very narrow and circumscribed limits. Smike (who, if he had ever been an object of interest in his life, had been one that day) accompanied them, joining sometimes one group and sometimes the other, as brother Charles, laying his hand upon his shoulder, bade him walk with him, or Nicholas, looking smilingly round, beckoned him to come and talk with the old friend who understood him best, and who could win a smile into his careworn face when none else could.

Pride is one of the seven deadly sins; but it cannot be the pride of a mother in her children, for that is a compound of two cardinal virtues — faith and hope. This was the pride which swelled Mrs. Nickleby's heart that night, and this it was which left upon her face, glistening in the light when they returned home, traces of the most grateful tears she had ever shed.

There was a quiet mirth about the little supper, which harmonized exactly with this tone of feeling, and at length the two gentlemen took their leave. There was one circumstance in the leave-taking which occasioned a vast deal of smiling and pleasantry, and that was, that Mr. Frank Cheeryble offered his hand to Kate twice over, quite forgetting that he had bade her adieu already. This was held by the elder Mr. Cheeryble to be a convincing proof that he was thinking of his German flame, and the jest occasioned immense laughter. So easy is it to move light hearts.

In short, it was a day of serene and tranquil happiness; and as we all have some bright day — many of

us, let us hope, among a crowd of others — to which we revert with particular delight, so this one was often looked back to afterwards, as holding a conspicuous place in the calendar of those who shared it.

Was there one exception, and that one he who needed to have been most happy?

Who was that who, in the silence of his own chamber, sunk upon his knees to pray as his first friend had taught him, and folding his hands and stretching them wildly in the air, fell upon his face in a passion of bitter grief?

CHAPTER XLIV.

MR. RALPH NICKLEBY CUTS AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE. IT WOULD ALSO APPEAR FROM THE CONTENTS HEREOF, THAT A JOKE, EVEN BETWEEN HUSBAND AND WIFE, MAY BE SOMETIMES CARRIED TOO FAR.

THERE are some men who, living with the one object of enriching themselves, no matter by what means, and being perfectly conscious of the baseness and rascality of the means which they will use every day towards this end, affect nevertheless — even to themselves — a high tone of moral rectitude, and shake their heads and sigh over the depravity of the world. Some of the craftiest scoundrels that ever walked this earth, or rather — for walking implies, at least, an erect position and the bearing of a man — that ever crawled and crept through life by its dirtiest and narrowest ways, will gravely jot down in diaries the events of every day, and keep a regular debtor and creditor account with heaven, which shall always show a floating balance in their own favor. Whether this is a gratuitous (the only gratuitous) part of the falsehood and trickery of such men's lives, or whether they really hope to cheat heaven itself, and lay up treasure in the next world by the same process which has enabled them to lay up treasure in this — not to question how it is, so it is. And, doubtless, such book-

keeping (like certain autobiographies which have enlightened the world) cannot fail to prove serviceable, in the one respect of sparing the recording Angel some time and labor.

Ralph Nickleby was not a man of this stamp. Stern, unyielding, dogged, and impenetrable, Ralph cared for nothing in life, or beyond it, save the gratification of two passions, avarice, the first and predominant appetite of his nature, and hatred, the second. Affecting to consider himself but a type of all humanity, he was at little pains to conceal his true character from the world in general, and in his own heart he exulted over and cherished every bad design as it had birth. The only scriptural admonition that Ralph Nickleby heeded, in the letter, was "know thyself." He knew himself well, and choosing to imagine that all mankind were cast in the same mould, hated them ; for, though no man hates himself, the coldest among us having too much self-love for that, yet, most men unconsciously judge the world from themselves, and it will be very generally found that those who sneer habitually at human nature, and affect to despise it, are among its worst and least pleasant samples.

But the present business of these adventures is with Ralph himself, who stood regarding Newman Noggs with a heavy frown, while that worthy took off his fingerless gloves, and spreading them carefully on the palm of his left hand, and flattening them' with his right to take the creases out, proceeded to roll them up with an absent air as if he were utterly regardless of all things else, in the deep interest of the ceremonial.

"Gone out of town!" said Ralph, slowly. "A mistake of yours. Go back again."

"No mistake," returned Newman. "Not even going; — gone."

"Has he turned girl or baby?" muttered Ralph, with a fretful gesture.

"I don't know," said Newman, "but he's gone."

The repetition of the word "gone," seemed to afford Newman Noggs inexpressible delight, in proportion as it annoyed Ralph Nickleby. He uttered the word with a full round emphasis, dwelling upon it as long as he decently could, and when he could hold out no longer without attracting observation, stood gasping it to himself, as if even that were a satisfaction.

"And *where* has he gone?" said Ralph.

"France," replied Newman. "Danger of another attack of erysipelas — a worse attack — in the head. So the doctors ordered him off. And he's gone."

"And Lord Frederick?" —— began Ralph.

"He's gone too," replied Newman.

"And he carries his drubbing with him, does he!" said Ralph, turning away — "pockets his bruises, and sneaks off without the retaliation of a word, or seeking the smallest reparation!"

"He's too ill," said Newman.

"Too ill!" repeated Ralph. "Why *I* would have it if I were dying; in that case I should only be the more determined to have it, and that without delay — I mean if I were he. But he's too ill! Poor Sir Mulberry! Too ill!"

Uttering these words with supreme contempt and great irritation of manner, Ralph signed hastily to Newman to leave the room; and throwing himself into his chair, beat his foot impatiently upon the ground.

"There is some spell about that boy," said Ralph,

grinding his teeth. "Circumstances conspire to help him. Talk of fortune's favors! What is even money to such Devil's luck as this!"

He thrust his hands impatiently into his pockets, but notwithstanding his previous reflection there was some consolation here, for his face relaxed a little; and although there was still a deep frown upon the contracted brow, it was one of calculation, and not of disappointment.

"This Hawk will come back, however," muttered Ralph; "and if I know the man — and I should by this time — his wrath will have lost nothing of its violence in the mean while. Obliged to live in retirement — the monotony of a sick-room to a man of his habits — no life — no drink — no play — nothing that he likes and lives by. He is not likely to forget his obligations to the cause of all this. Few men would; but he of all others — no, no!"

He smiled and shook his head, and resting his chin upon his hand, fell a-musing, and smiled again. After a time he rose and rang the bell.

"That Mr. Squeers; has he been here?" said Ralph.

"He was here last night. I left him here when I went home," returned Newman.

"I know that, fool, do I not?" said Ralph, irascibly.

"Has he been here since? Was he here this morning?"

"No," bawled Newman, in a very loud key.

"If he comes while I am out — he is pretty sure to be here by nine to-night, let him wait. And if there's another man with him, as there will be — perhaps," said Ralph, checking himself, "let him wait too."

"Let 'em both wait?" said Newman.

"Aye," replied Ralph, turning upon him with an angry

look. "Help me on with this spencer, and don't repeat after me, like a croaking parrot."

"I wish I was a parrot," said Newman, sulkily.

"I wish you were," rejoined Ralph, drawing his spencer on; "I'd have wrung your neck long ago."

Newman returned no answer to this compliment, but looked over Ralph's shoulder for an instant, (he was adjusting the collar of the spencer behind, just then,) as if he were strongly disposed to tweak him by the nose. Meeting Ralph's eye, however, he suddenly recalled his wandering fingers, and rubbed his own red nose with a vehemence quite astonishing.

Bestowing no further notice upon his eccentric follower than a threatening look, and an admonition to be careful and make no mistake, Ralph took his hat and gloves, and walked out.

He appeared to have a very extraordinary and miscellaneous connection, and very odd calls he made — some at great rich houses, and some at small poor ones — but all upon one subject: money. His face was a talisman to the porters and servants of his more dashing clients, and procured him ready admission, though he trudged on foot, and others, who were denied, rattled to the door in carriages. Here he was all softness and cringing civility; his step so light, that it scarcely produced a sound upon the thick carpets; his voice so soft that it was not audible beyond the person to whom it was addressed. But in the poorer habitations Ralph was another man; his boots creaked upon the passage-floor as he walked boldly in; his voice was harsh and loud as he demanded the money that was overdue; his threats were coarse and angry. With another class of customers, Ralph was again another man. These were attorneys of more

than doubtful reputation, who helped him to new business, or raised fresh profits upon old. With them Ralph was familiar and jocose — humorous upon the topics of the day, and especially pleasant upon bankruptcies and pecuniary difficulties that made good for trade. In short, it would have been difficult to have recognized the same man under these various aspects, but for the bulky leather case full of bills and notes which he drew from his pocket at every house, and the constant repetition of the same complaint, (varied only in tone and style of delivery,) that the world thought him rich, and that perhaps he might be if he had his own; but there was no getting money in when it was once out, either principal or interest, and it was a hard matter to live — even to live from day to day.

It was evening before a long round of such visits (interrupted only by a scanty dinner at an eating-house) terminated at Pimlico, and Ralph walked along St. James's Park, on his way home.

There were some deep schemes in his head, as the puckered brow and firmly-set mouth would have abundantly testified, even if they had been unaccompanied by a complete indifference to, or unconsciousness of, the objects about him. So complete was his abstraction, however, that Ralph, usually as quick-sighted as any man, did not observe that he was followed by a shambling figure, which at one time stole behind him with noiseless footsteps, at another crept a few paces before him, and at another glided along by his side; at all times regarding him with an eye so keen, and a look so eager and attentive, that it was more like the expression of an intrusive face in some powerful picture or strongly marked dream, than the scrutiny even of a most interested and anxious observer.

The sky had been lowering and dark for some time, and the commencement of a violent storm of rain drove Ralph for shelter to a tree. He was leaning against it with folded arms, still buried in thought, when, happening to raise his eyes, he suddenly met those of a man who, creeping round the trunk, peered into his face with a searching look. There was something in the usurer's expression at the moment, which the man appeared to remember well, for it decided him; and stepping close up to Ralph, he pronounced his name.

Astonished for the moment, Ralph fell back a couple of paces and surveyed him from head to foot. A spare, dark, withered man, of about his own age, with a stooping body, and a very sinister face rendered more ill-favored by hollow and hungry cheeks, deeply sunburnt, and thick black eyebrows, blacker in contrast with the perfect whiteness of his hair; roughly clothed in shabby garments, of a strange and uncouth make; and having about him an indefinable manner of depression and degradation — this, for a moment, was all he saw. But he looked again, and the face and person seemed gradually to grow less strange; to change as he looked, to subside and soften into lineaments that were familiar, until at last they resolved themselves, as if by some strange optical illusion, into those of one whom he had known for many years, and forgotten and lost sight of for nearly as many more.

The man saw that the recognition was mutual, and beckoning to Ralph to take his former place under the tree, and not to stand in the falling rain, of which, in his first surprise, he had been quite regardless, addressed him in a hoarse, faint tone.

"You would hardly have known me from my voice, I suppose, Mr. Nickleby?" he said.

"No," returned Ralph, bending a severe look upon him. "Though there is something in that, that I remember now."

"There is little in me that you can call to mind as having been there eight years ago, I dare say?" observed the other.

"Quite enough," said Ralph, carelessly, and averting his face. "More than enough."

"If I had remained in doubt about *you*, Mr. Nickleby," said the other, "this reception, and *your* manner, would have decided me very soon."

"Did you expect any other?" asked Ralph, sharply.

"No!" said the man.

"You were right," retorted Ralph; "and as you feel no surprise, need express none."

"Mr. Nickleby," said the man, bluntly, after a brief pause, during which he had seemed to struggle with an inclination to answer him by some reproach, "will you hear a few words that I have to say?"

"I am obliged to wait here till the rain holds a little," said Ralph, looking abroad. "If you talk, sir, I shall not put my fingers in my ears, though your talking may have as much effect as if I did."

"I was once in your confidence," — thus his companion began. Ralph looked round, and smiled involuntarily.

"Well," said the other, "as much in your confidence as you ever chose to let anybody be."

"Ah!" rejoined Ralph, folding his arms; "that's another thing — quite another thing."

"Don't let us play upon words, Mr. Nickleby, in the name of humanity."

"Of what?" said Ralph.

"Of humanity," replied the other, sternly. "I am

hungry and in want. If the change that you must see in me after so long an absence — must see, for I, upon whom it has come by slow and hard degrees, see it and know it well — will not move you to pity, let the knowledge that bread; not the daily bread of the Lord's Prayer, which, as it is offered up in cities like this, is understood to include half the luxuries of the world for the rich and just as much coarse food as will support life for the poor — not that, but bread, a crust of dry hard bread, is beyond my reach to-day — let that have some weight with you, if nothing else has."

"If this is the usual form in which you beg, sir," said Ralph, "you have studied your part well; but if you will take advice from one who knows something of the world and its ways, I should recommend a lower tone — a little lower tone, or you stand a fair chance of being starved in good earnest."

As he said this, Ralph clenched his left wrist tightly with his right hand, and inclining his head a little on one side and dropping his chin upon his breast, looked at him whom he addressed with a frowning, sullen face: the very picture of a man whom nothing could move or soften.

"Yesterday was my first day in London," said the old man, glancing at his travel-stained dress and worn shoes.

"It would have been better for you, I think, if it had been your last also," replied Ralph.

"I have been seeking you these two days, where I thought you were most likely to be found," resumed the other more humbly, "and I met you here at last, when I had almost given up the hope of encountering you, Mr. Nickleby."

He seemed to wait for some reply, but Ralph giving him none, he continued —

"I am a most miserable and wretched outcast, nearly sixty years old, and as destitute and helpless as a child of six."

"I am sixty years old, too," replied Ralph, "and am neither destitute nor helpless. Work. Don't make fine play-acting speeches about bread, but earn it."

"How?" cried the other. "Where? Show me the means. Will you give them to me — will you?"

"I did once," replied Ralph, composedly, "you scarcely need ask me whether I will again."

"It's twenty years ago, or more," said the man, in a suppressed voice, "since you and I fell out. You remember that? I claimed a share in the profits of some business I brought to you, and, as I persisted, you arrested me for an old advance of ten pounds, odd shillings — including interest at fifty per cent., or so."

"I remember something of it," replied Ralph, carelessly. "What then?"

"That didn't part us," said the man. "I made submission, being on the wrong side of the bolts and bars; and as you were not the made man then that you are now, you were glad enough to take back a clerk who wasn't over-nice, and who knew something of the trade you drove."

"You begged and prayed, and I consented," returned Ralph. "That was kind of me. Perhaps I did want you — I forget. I should think I did, or you would have begged in vain. You were useful — not too honest, not too delicate, not too nice of hand or heart — but useful."

"Useful, indeed!" said the man. "Come. You had pinched and ground me down for some years before that, but I had served you faithfully up to that time, in spite of all your dog's usage — had I?"

Ralph made no reply.

"Had I?" said the man again.

"You had had your wages," rejoined Ralph, "and had done your work. We stood on equal ground so far, and could both cry quits."

"Then, but not afterwards," said the other.

"Not afterwards, certainly, nor even then, for (as you have just said) you owed me money, and do still," replied Ralph.

"That's not all," said the man, eagerly. "That's not all. Mark that. I didn't forget that old sore, trust me. Partly in remembrance of that, and partly in the hope of making money some day by the scheme, I took advantage of my position about you, and possessed myself of a hold upon you, which you would give half of all you have, to know, and never can know but through me. I left you — long after that time, remember — and, for some poor trickery that came within the law, but was nothing to what you money-makers daily practise just outside its bounds, was sent away a convict for seven years. I have returned what you see me. Now, Mr. Nickleby," said the man, with a strange mixture of humility and sense of power, "what help and assistance will you give me — what bribe, to speak out plainly? My expectations are not monstrous, but I must live, and to live I must eat and drink. Money is on your side, and hunger and thirst on mine. You may drive an easy bargain."

"Is that all?" said Ralph, still eying his companion with the same steady look, and moving nothing but his lips.

"It depends on you, Mr. Nickleby, whether that's all or not," was the rejoinder.

"Why then, harkye, Mr. ——, I don't know by what name I am to call you," said Ralph.

"By my old one, if you like."

"Why, then, harkye, Mr. Brooker," said Ralph, in his harshest accents, "and don't expect to draw another speech from me — harkye, sir. I know you of old for a ready scoundrel, but you never had a stout heart; and hard work, with (maybe) chains upon those legs of yours, and shorter food than when I 'pinched' and 'ground' you, has blunted your wits, or you would not come with such a tale as this to me. You a hold upon me! Keep it, or publish it to the world, if you like."

"I can't do that," interposed Brooker. "That wouldn't serve me."

"Wouldn't it?" said Ralph. "It will serve you as much as bringing it to me, I promise you. To be plain with you, I am a careful man, and know my affairs thoroughly. I know the world, and the world knows me. Whatever you gleaned, or heard, or saw, when you served me, the world knows and magnifies already. You could tell it nothing that would surprise it — unless, indeed, it redounded to my credit or honor, and then it would scout you for a liar. And yet I don't find business slack, or clients scrupulous. Quite the contrary. I am reviled or threatened every day by one man or another," said Ralph; "but things roll on just the same, and I don't grow poorer either."

"I neither revile nor threaten," rejoined the man. "I can tell you of what you have lost by my act, what I only can restore, and what, if I die without restoring, dies with me, and never can be regained."

"I tell my money pretty accurately, and generally keep it in my own custody," said Ralph. "I look

sharply after most men that I deal with, and most of all I looked sharply after you. You are welcome to all you have kept from me."

"Are those of your own name dear to you?" said the man emphatically. "If they are" ——

"They are not," returned Ralph, exasperated at this perseverance, and the thought of Nicholas, which the last question awakened. "They are not. If you had come as a common beggar, I might have thrown a sixpence to you in remembrance of the clever knave you used to be; but since you try to palm these stale tricks upon one you might have known better, I'll not part with a half-penny — nor would I to save you from rotting. And remember this, 'scape-gallows," said Ralph, menacing him with his hand, "that if we meet again, and you so much as notice me by one begging gesture, you shall see the inside of a jail once more, and tighten this hold upon me in intervals of the hard labor that vagabonds are put to. There's my answer to your trash. Take it."

With a disdainful scowl at the object of his anger, who met his eye but uttered not a word, Ralph walked away at his usual pace, without manifesting the slightest curiosity to see what became of his late companion, or indeed once looking behind him. The man remained on the same spot with his eyes fixed upon his retreating figure until it was lost to view, and then drawing his arms about his chest, as if the damp and lack of food struck coldly to him, lingered with slouching steps by the wayside, and begged of those who passed along.

Ralph, in nowise moved by what had lately passed, further than as he had already expressed himself, walked deliberately on, and turning out of the Park and leaving

Golden Square on his right, took his way through some streets at the west end of the town until he arrived in that particular one in which stood the residence of Madame Mantalini. The name of that lady no longer appeared on the flaming door-plate, that of Miss Knag being substituted in its stead; but the bonnets and dresses were still dimly visible in the first-floor windows by the decaying light of a summer's evening, and, excepting this ostensible alteration in the proprietorship, the establishment wore its old appearance.

"Humph!" muttered Ralph, drawing his hand across his mouth with a connoisseur-like air, and surveying the house from top to bottom; "these people look pretty well. They can't last long; but if I know of their going, in good time, I am safe, and a fair profit too. I must keep them closely in view — that's all."

So, nodding his head very complacently, Ralph was leaving the spot, when his quick ear caught the sound of a confused noise and hubbub of voices, mingled with a great running up and down stairs, in the very house which had been the subject of his scrutiny; and while he was hesitating whether to knock at the door or listen at the key-hole a little longer, a female servant of Madame Mantalini's (whom he had often seen) opened it abruptly and bounced out, with her blue cap-ribbons streaming in the air.

"Hallo here. Stop!" cried Ralph. "What's the matter. Here am I. Didn't you hear me knock?"

"Oh! Mr. Nickleby, sir," said the girl. "Go up, for the love of Gracious. Master's been and done it again."

"Done what?" said Ralph, tartly, "what d'ye mean?"

"I knew he would if he was drove to it," cried the girl. "I said so all along."

"Come here, you silly wench," said Ralph, catching her by the wrist; "and don't carry family matters to the neighbors, destroying the credit of the establishment. Come here; do you hear me, girl?"

Without any further expostulation, he led or rather pulled the frightened hand-maid into the house, and shut the door; then bidding her walk up-stairs before him, followed without more ceremony.

Guided by the noise of a great many voices all talking together, and passing the girl in his impatience, before they had ascended many steps, Ralph quickly reached the private sitting-room, when he was rather amazed by the confused and inexplicable scene in which he suddenly found himself.

There were all the young lady-workers, some with bonnets and some without, in various attitudes expressive of alarm and consternation; some gathered round Madame Mantalini, who was in tears upon one chair; and others round Miss Knag, who was in opposition tears upon another; and others round Mr. Mantalini, who was perhaps the most striking figure in the whole group, for Mr. Mantalini's legs were extended at full length upon the floor, and his head and shoulders were supported by a very tall footman, who didn't seem to know what to do with them, and Mr. Mantalini's eyes were closed, and his face was pale, and his hair was comparatively straight, and his whiskers and mustache were limp, and his teeth were clinched, and he had a little bottle in his right hand, and a little teaspoon in his left; and his hands, arms, legs, and shoulders, were all stiff and powerless. And yet Madame Mantalini was not weeping upon the body, but was scolding violently upon her chair; and all this amidst a clamor of tongues, per-

fectly deafening, and which really appeared to have driven the unfortunate footman to the utmost verge of distraction.

"What is the matter here?" said Ralph, pressing forward.

At this inquiry, the clamor was increased twenty-fold, and an astounding string of such shrill contradictions as "He's poisoned himself" — "He hasn't" — "Send for a doctor" — "Don't" — "He's dying" — "He isn't, he's only pretending" — with various other cries, poured forth with bewildering volubility, until Madame Mantalini was seen to address herself to Ralph, when female curiosity to know what she would say, prevailed, and, as if by general consent, a dead silence, unbroken by a single whisper, instantaneously succeeded.

"Mr. Nickleby," said Madame Mantalini; "by what chance you came here, I don't know."

Here a gurgling voice was heard to ejaculate — as part of the wanderings of a sick man — the words "Demnition sweetness!" but nobody heeded them except the footman, who, being startled to hear such awful tones proceeding, as it were, from between his very fingers, dropped his master's head upon the floor with a pretty loud crash, and then, without an effort to lift it up, gazed upon the by-standers, as if he had done something rather clever than otherwise.

"I will, however," continued Madame Mantalini, drying her eyes, and speaking with great indignation, "say before you, and before everybody here, for the first time, and once for all, that I never will supply that man's extravagances and viciousness again. I have been a dupe and a fool to him long enough. In future, he shall support himself if he can, and then he may spend what

money he pleases, upon whom and how he pleases; but it shall not be mine, and therefore you had better pause before you trust him further."

Thereupon Madame Mantalini, quite unmoved by some most pathetic lamentations on the part of her husband, that the apothecary had not mixed the prussic acid strong enough, and that he must take another bottle or two to finish the work he had in hand, entered into a catalogue of that amiable gentleman's gallantries, deceptions, extravagances, and infidelities (especially the last), winding up with a protest against being supposed to entertain the smallest remnant of regard for him; and adducing, in proof of the altered state of her affections, the circumstance of his having poisoned himself in private no less than six times within the last fortnight, and her not having once interfered by word or deed to save his life.

"And I insist on being separated and left to myself," said Madame Mantalini, sobbing. "If he dares to refuse me a separation, I'll have one in law — I can — and I hope this will be a warning to all girls who have seen this disgraceful exhibition."

Miss Knag, who was unquestionably the oldest girl in company, said with great solemnity, that it would be a warning to *her*, and so did the young ladies generally, with the exception of one or two who appeared to entertain some doubts whether such whiskers could do wrong.

"Why do you say all this before so many listeners?" said Ralph, in a low voice. "You know you are not in earnest."

"I *am* in earnest," replied Madame Mantalini, aloud, and retreating toward Miss Knag.

"Well, but consider," reasoned Ralph, who had a great interest in the matter. "It would be well to reflect. A married woman has no property."

"Not a solitary single individual dem, my soul," said Mr. Mantalini, raising himself upon his elbow.

"I am quite aware of that," retorted Madame Mantalini, tossing her head; "and *I* have none. The business, the stock, this house, and everything in it, all belong to Miss Knag."

"That's quite true, Madame Mantalini," said Miss Knag, with whom her late employer had secretly come to an amicable understanding on this point. "Very true, indeed, Madame Mantalini — hem — very true. And I never was more glad in all my life, that I had strength of mind to resist matrimonial offers, no matter how advantageous, than I am when I think of my present position as compared with your most unfortunate and most undeserved one, Madame Mantalini."

"Demmit!" cried Mr. Mantalini, turning his head towards his wife. "Will it not slap and pinch the envious dowager, that dares to reflect upon its own delicious?"

But the day of Mr. Mantalini's blandishments had departed. "Miss Knag, sir," said his wife, "is my particular friend;" and although Mr. Mantalini leered till his eyes seemed in danger of never coming back to their right places again, Madame Mantalini showed no signs of softening.

To do the excellent Miss Knag justice, she had been mainly instrumental in bringing about this altered state of things, for, finding by daily experience, that there was no chance of the business thriving, or even continuing to exist, while Mr. Mantalini had any hand in the

expenditure, and having now a considerable interest in its well-doing, she had sedulously applied herself to the investigation of some little matters connected with that gentleman's private character, which she had so well elucidated, and artfully imparted to Madame Mantalini, as to open her eyes more effectually than the closest and most philosophical reasoning could have done in a series of years. To which end, the accidental discovery by Miss Knag of some tender correspondence, in which Madame Mantalini was described as "old" and "ordinary," had most providentially contributed.

However, notwithstanding her firmness, Madame Mantalini wept very piteously; and as she leant upon Miss Knag, and signed towards the door, that young lady and all the other young ladies with sympathizing faces, proceeded to bear her out.

"Nickleby," said Mr. Mantalini in tears, "you have been made a witness to this demnition cruelty, on the part of the demdest enslaver and captivater that never was, oh dem! I forgive that woman."

"Forgive!" repeated Madame Mantalini, angrily.

"I do forgive her, Nickleby," said Mr. Mantalini. "You will blame me, the world will blame me, the women will blame me; everybody will laugh, and scoff, and smile, and grin most demnebly. They will say, 'She had a blessing. She did not know it. He was too weak; he was too good; he was a dem'd fine fellow, but he loved too strong; he could not bear her to be cross, and call him wicked names. It was a dem'd case, there never was a dem'der.' — But I forgive her."

With this affecting speech Mr. Mantalini fell down again very flat, and lay to all appearance without sense or motion, until all the females had left the room, when

he came cautiously into a sitting posture, and confronted Ralph with a very blank face, and the little bottle still in one hand and the teaspoon in the other.

"You may put away those fooleries now, and live by your wits again," said Ralph, coolly putting on his hat.

"Demmit, Nickleby, you're not serious?"

"I seldom joke," said Ralph. "Good-night."

"No, but Nickleby" — said Mantalini.

"I am wrong, perhaps," rejoined Ralph. "I hope so. You should know best. Good-night."

Affecting not to hear his entreaties that he would stay and advise with him, Ralph left the crest-fallen Mr. Mantalini to his meditations, and left the house quietly.

"Oho!" he said, "sets the wind that way so soon? Half knave and half fool, and detected in both characters — hum — I think your day is over, sir."

As he said this, he made some memorandum in his pocket-book in which Mr. Mantalini's name figured conspicuously, and finding by his watch that it was between nine and ten o'clock, made all speed home.

"Are they here?" was the first question he asked of Newman.

Newman nodded. "Been here half an hour."

"Two of them? one a fat sleek man?"

"Aye," said Newman. "In your room now."

"Good," rejoined Ralph. "Get me a coach."

"A coach! What you — going to — Eh?" stammered Newman.

Ralph angrily repeated his orders, and Noggs, who might well have been excused for wondering at such an unusual and extraordinary circumstance — for he had never seen Ralph in a coach in his life — de-

parted on his errand, and presently returned with the conveyance.

Into it went Mr. Squeers, and Ralph, and the third man, whom Newman Noggs had never seen. Newman stood upon the door-step to see them off, not troubling himself to wonder where or upon what business they were going, until he chanced by mere accident to hear Ralph name the address whither the coachman was to drive.

Quick as lightning and in a state of the most extreme wonder, Newman darted into his little office for his hat, and limped after the coach as if with the intention of getting up behind; but in this design he was balked, for it had too much the start of him and was soon hopelessly ahead, leaving him gaping in the empty street.

"I don't know though," said Noggs, stopping for breath, "any good that I could have done by going too. He would have seen me if I had. Drive *there!* What can come of this! If I had only known it yesterday I could have told — drive there! There's mischief in it. There must be."

His reflections were interrupted by a gray-haired man of a very remarkable, though far from prepossessing appearance, who, coming stealthily towards him, solicited relief.

Newman, still cogitating deeply, turned away; but the man followed him, and pressed him with such a tale of misery that Newman (who might have been considered a hopeless person to beg from, and who had little enough to give) looked into his hat for some half-pence which he usually kept screwed up, when he had any, in a corner of his pocket-handkerchief.

While he was busily untwisting the knot with his

teeth, the man said something which attracted his attention; whatever that something was, it led to something else, and in the end he and Newman walked away side by side — the strange man talking earnestly, and Newman listening.

CHAPTER XLV.

CONTAINING MATTER OF A SURPRISING KIND.

"As we gang awa' fra' Lunnun to-morrow neeght, and as I dinnot know that I was e'er so happy in a' my days, Misther Nickleby, Ding! but I *will* tak' anoother glass to our next merry meeting!"

So said John Browdie, rubbing his hands with great joyousness, and looking round him with a ruddy shining face, quite in keeping with the declaration.

The time at which John found himself in this enviable condition, was the same evening to which the last chapter bore reference; the place was the cottage; and the assembled company were Nicholas, Mrs. Nickleby, Mrs. Browdie, Kate Nickleby, and Smike.

A very merry party they had been. Mrs. Nickleby, knowing of her son's obligations to the honest Yorkshireman, had, after some demur, yielded her consent to Mr. and Mrs. Browdie being invited out to tea; in the way of which arrangement, there were at first sundry difficulties and obstacles, arising out of her not having had an opportunity of "calling" upon Mrs. Browdie first; for although Mrs. Nickleby very often observed with much complacency (as most punctilious people do), that she had not an atom of pride or formality about her, still she was a great stickler for dignity and ceremonies; and as

it was manifest that, until a call had been made, she could not be (politely speaking, and according to the laws of society) even cognizant of the fact of Mrs. Browdie's existence, she felt her situation to be one of peculiar delicacy and difficulty.

"The call *must* originate with me, my dear," said Mrs. Nickleby, "that's indispensable. The fact is, my dear, that it's necessary there should be a sort of condescension on my part, and that I should show this young person that I am willing to take notice of her. There's a very respectable-looking young man," added Mrs. Nickleby, after a short consideration, "who is conductor to one of the omnibuses that go by here, and who wears a glazed hat — your sister and I have noticed him very often — he has a wart upon his nose, Kate, you know, exactly like a gentleman's servant."

"Have all gentlemen's servants warts upon their noses, mother?" asked Nicholas.

"Nicholas, my dear, how very absurd you are," returned his mother; "of course I mean that his glazed hat looks like a gentleman's servant, and not the wart upon his nose — though even that is not so ridiculous as it may seem to you, for we had a foot-boy once, who had not only a wart, but a wen also, and a very large wen too, and he demanded to have his wages raised in consequence, because he found it came very expensive. Let me see, what was I — oh yes, I know. The best way that I can think of, would be to send a card, and my compliments, (I've no doubt he'd take 'em for a pot of porter,) by this young man, to the Saracen with Two Necks — if the waiter took him for a gentleman's servant, so much the better. Then all Mrs. Browdie would have to do, would be to send her card back by the car-

rier (he could easily come with a double knock), and there's an end of it."

"My dear mother," said Nicholas, "I don't suppose such unsophisticated people as these ever had a card of their own, or ever will have."

"Oh that, indeed, Nicholas, my dear," returned Mrs. Nickleby, "that's another thing. If you put it upon that ground, why, of course, I have no more to say, than that I have no doubt they are very good sort of persons, and that I have no kind of objection to their coming here to tea if they like, and shall make a point of being very civil to them if they do."

The point being thus effectually set at rest, and Mrs. Nickleby duly placed in the patronizing and mildly-condescending position which became her rank and matrimonial years, Mr. and Mrs. Browdie were invited and came; and as they were very deferential to Mrs. Nickleby, and seemed to have a becoming appreciation of her greatness, and were very much pleased with everything, the good lady had more than once given Kate to understand, in a whisper, that she thought they were the very best-meaning people she had ever seen, and perfectly well-behaved.

And thus it came to pass, that John Browdie declared, in the parlor after supper, to wit, at twenty minutes before eleven o'clock, P. M., that he had never been so happy in all his days.

Nor was Mrs. Browdie much behind her husband in this respect, for that young matron — whose rustic beauty contrasted very prettily with the more delicate loveliness of Kate, and without suffering by the contrast either, for each served as it were to set off and decorate the other — could not sufficiently admire the

gentle and winning manners of the young lady, or the engaging affability of the elder one. Then Kate had the art of turning the conversation to subjects upon which the country girl, bashful at first in strange company, could feel herself at home; and if Mrs. Nickleby was not quite so felicitous at times in the selection of topics of discourse, or if she did seem, as Mrs. Browdie expressed it, "rather high in her notions," still nothing could be kinder, and that she took considerable interest in the young couple was manifest from the very long lectures on housewifery with which she was so obliging as to entertain Mrs. Browdie's private ear, which were illustrated by various references to the domestic economy of the cottage, in which (those duties falling exclusively upon Kate) the good lady had about as much share, either in theory or practice, as any one of the statues of the Twelve Apostles which embellish the exterior of St. Paul's Cathedral.

"Mr. Browdie," said Kate, addressing his young wife, "is the best-humored, the kindest and heartiest creature I ever saw. If I were oppressed with I don't know how many cares, it would make me happy only to look at him."

"He does seem indeed, upon my word, a most excellent creature, Kate," said Mrs. Nickleby; "most excellent. And I am sure that at all times it will give me pleasure — really pleasure now — to have you, Mrs. Browdie, to see me in this plain and homely manner. We make no display," said Mrs. Nickleby, with an air which seemed to insinuate that they could make a vast deal if they were so disposed — "no fuss, no preparation; I wouldn't allow it. I said 'Kate, my dear, you will only make Mrs. Browdie feel uncom-

fortable, and how very foolish and inconsiderate that would be!'"

"I am very much obliged to you, I am sure, ma'am," returned Mrs. Browdie, gratefully. "It's nearly eleven o'clock, John. I am afraid we are keeping you up very late, ma'am."

"Late!" cried Mrs. Nickleby, with a sharp thin laugh, and one little cough at the end, like a note of admiration expressed. "This is quite early for us. We used to keep such hours! Twelve, one, two, three o'clock was nothing to us. Balls, dinners, card-parties — never were such rakes as the people about where we used to live. I often think now, I am sure, that how we ever could go through with it is quite astonishing — and that is just the evil of having a large connection and being a great deal sought after, which I would recommend all young married people steadily to resist; though of course, and it's perfectly clear, and a very happy thing too, *I* think, that very few young married people can be exposed to such temptations. There was one family in particular, that used to live about a mile from us — not straight down the road, but turning sharp off to the left by the turnpike where the Plymouth mail ran over the donkey — that were quite extraordinary people for giving the most extravagant parties, with artificial flowers and champagne, and variegated lamps, and, in short, every delicacy of eating and drinking that the most singular epicure could possibly require — I don't think there ever were such people as those Peltiroguses. You remember the Peltiroguses, Kate?"

Kate saw that for the ease and comfort of the visitors it was high time to stay this flood of recollection,

so answered that she entertained of the Peltiroguses a most vivid and distinct remembrance; and then said that Mr. Browdie had half promised, early in the evening, that he would sing a Yorkshire song, and that she was most impatient that he should redeem his promise, because she was sure it would afford her mamma more amusement and pleasure than it was possible to express.

Mrs. Nickleby confirming her daughter with the best possible grace — for there was patronage in that too, and a kind of implication that she had a discerning taste in such matters, and was something of a critic — John Browdie proceeded to consider the words of some north-country ditty, and to take his wife's recollection respecting the same. This done, he made divers ungainly movements in his chair, and singling out one particular fly on the ceiling from the other flies there asleep, fixed his eyes upon him, and began to roar a meek sentiment (supposed to be uttered by a gentle swain fast pining away with love and despair) in a voice of thunder.

At the end of the first verse, as though some person without had waited until then to make himself audible, was heard a loud and violent knocking at the street-door — so loud and so violent, indeed, that the ladies started as by one accord, and John Browdie stopped.

"It must be some mistake," said Nicholas, carelessly. "We know nobody who would come here at this hour."

Mrs. Nickleby surmised, however, that perhaps the counting-house was burnt down, or perhaps "the Mr. Cheerybles" had sent to take Nicholas into partnership (which certainly appeared highly probable at that time of night), or perhaps Mr. Linkinwater had run

away with the property, or perhaps Miss La Creevy was taken ill, or perhaps ——

But a hasty exclamation from Kate stopped her abruptly in her conjectures, and Ralph Nickleby walked into the room.

"Stay," said Ralph, as Nicholas rose, and Kate, making her way towards him, threw herself upon his arm. "Before that boy says a word, hear me."

Nicholas bit his lip and shook his head in a threatening manner, but appeared for the moment unable to articulate a syllable. Kate clung closer to his arm, Smike retreated behind them, and John Browdie, who had heard of Ralph, and appeared to have no great difficulty in recognizing him, stepped between the old man and his young friend, as if with the intention of preventing either of them from advancing a step farther.

"Hear me, I say," said Ralph, "and not him."

"Say what thou'st gotten to say then, sir," retorted John; "and tak' care thou dinnot put up angry bluid which thou'dst betther try to quiet."

"I should know *you*," said Ralph, "by your tongue; and *him*" (pointing to Smike) "by his looks."

"Don't speak to him," said Nicholas, recovering his voice. "I will not have it. I will not hear him. I do not know that man. I cannot breathe the air that he corrupts. His presence is an insult to my sister. It is shame to see him. I will not bear it, by" ——

"Stand!" cried John, laying his heavy hand upon his chest.

"Then let him instantly retire," said Nicholas, struggling. "I am not going to lay hands upon him, but he shall withdraw. I will not have him here. John

— John Browdie — is this my house — am I a child? If he stands there," cried Nicholas, burning with fury, "looking so calmly upon those who know his black and dastardly heart, he'll drive me mad."

To all these exclamations John Browdie answered not a word, but he retained his hold upon Nicholas; and when he was silent again, spoke.

"There's more to say and hear than thou think'st for," said John. "I tell 'ee I ha' gotten scent o' thot already. Wa'at be that shadow ootside door there? Noo school-measther, show thyself, mun; dinnot be sheame-feaced. Noo, auld gen'l'man, let's have school-measther, coom."

Hearing this adjuration, Mr. Squeers, who had been lingering in the passage until such time as it should be expedient for him to enter and he could appear with effect, was fain to present himself in a somewhat undignified and sneaking way; at which John Browdie laughed with such keen and heartfelt delight, that even Kate, in all the pain, anxiety and surprise of the scene, and though the tears were in her eyes, felt a disposition to join him.

"Have you done enjoying yourself, sir?" said Ralph, at length.

"Pratty nigh for the prasant time, sir," replied John.

"I can wait," said Ralph. "Take your own time, pray."

Ralph waited until there was a perfect silence, and then turning to Mrs. Nickleby, but directing an eager glance at Kate, as if more anxious to watch his effect upon her, said: —

"Now, ma'am, listen to me. I don't imagine that you were a party to a very fine tirade of words sent

me by that boy of yours, because I don't believe that under his control, you have the slightest will of your own, or that your advice, your opinion, your wants, your wishes — anything which in nature and reason (or of what use is your great experience?) ought to weigh with him — has the slightest influence or weight whatever, or is taken for a moment into account."

Mrs. Nickleby shook her head and sighed, as if there were a good deal in that, certainly.

"For this reason," resumed Ralph, "I address myself to you, ma'am. For this reason, partly, and partly because I do not wish to be disgraced by the acts of a vicious stripling whom *I* was obliged to disown, and who, afterwards, in his boyish majesty, feigns to — ha! ha! — to disown *me*, I present myself here to-night. I have another motive in coming — a motive of humanity. I come here," said Ralph, looking round with a biting and triumphant smile, and gloating and dwelling upon the words as if he were loath to lose the pleasure of saying them, "to restore a parent his child. Aye, sir," he continued, bending eagerly forward, and addressing Nicholas, as he marked the change of his countenance, "to restore a parent his child — his son, sir — trepanned, waylaid, and guarded at every turn by you, with the base design of robbing him some day of any little wretched pittance of which he might become possessed."

"In that, you know you lie," said Nicholas, proudly.

"In this, I know I speak the truth — I have his father here," retorted Ralph.

"Here!" sneered Squeers, stepping forward. "Do you hear that? Here! Didn't I tell you to be careful that his father didn't turn up, and send him back to me?

Why, his father's my friend; he's to come back to me directly, he is. Now, what do you say — eh! — now — come — what do you say to that — a'n't you sorry you took so much trouble for nothing? a'n't you? a'n't you?"

"You bear upon your body certain marks I gave you," said Nicholas, looking quietly away, "and may talk in acknowledgment of them as much as you please. You'll talk a long time before you rub them out, Mr. Squeers."

The estimable gentleman last-named, cast a hasty look at the table, as if he were prompted by this retort to throw a jug or bottle at the head of Nicholas, but he was interrupted in this design (if such design he had) by Ralph, who, touching him on the elbow, bade him tell the father that he might now appear and claim his son.

This being purely a labor of love, Mr. Squeers readily complied, and leaving the room for the purpose, almost immediately returned, supporting a sleek personage with an oily face, who, bursting from him, and giving to view the form and face of Mr. Snawley, made straight up to Smike, and tucking that poor fellow's head under his arm in a most uncouth and awkward embrace, elevated his broad-brimmed hat at arm's length in the air as a token of devout thanksgiving, exclaiming, meanwhile, "How little did I think of this here joyful meeting, when I saw him last! Oh, how little did I think it!"

"Be composed, sir," said Ralph, with a gruff expression of sympathy, "you have got him now."

"Got him! Oh, haven't I got him! Have I got him, though?" cried Mr. Snawley, scarcely able to believe it. "Yes, here he is, flesh and blood, flesh and blood."

"Vary little flesh," said John Browdie.

Mr. Snawley was too much occupied by his parental

feelings to notice this remark; and, to assure himself more completely of the restoration of his child, tucked his head under his arm again, and kept it there.

"What was it," said Snawley, "that made me take such a strong interest in him, when that worthy instructor of youth brought him to my house? What was it that made me burn all over with a wish to chastise him severely for cutting away from his best friends — his pastors and masters?"

"It was parental instinct, sir," observed Squeers.

"That's what it was, sir," rejoined Snawley; "the elevated feeling — the feeling of the ancient Romans and Grecians, and of the beasts of the field and birds of the air, with the exception of rabbits and tom-cats, which sometimes devour their offspring. My heart yearned towards him. I could have — I don't know what I couldn't have done to him in the anger of a father."

"It only shows what Natur' is, sir," said Mr. Squeers. "She's a rum 'un, is Natur'."

"She is a holy thing, sir," remarked Snawley.

"I believe you," added Mr. Squeers, with a moral sigh. "I should like to know how we should ever get on without her. Natur'," said Mr. Squeers, solemnly, "is more easier conceived than described. Oh what a blessed thing, sir, to be in a state of natur'!"

Pending this philosophical discourse, the by-standers had been quite stupefied with amazement, while Nicholas had looked keenly from Snawley to Squeers, and from Squeers to Ralph, divided between his feelings of disgust, doubt, and surprise. At this juncture, Smike escaping from his father fled to Nicholas, and implored him, in most moving terms, never to give him up, but to let him live and die beside him.

"If you are this boy's father," said Nicholas, "look at the wreck he is, and tell me that you purpose to send him back to that loathsome den from which I brought him."

"Scandal again!" cried Squeers. "Recollect, you a'n't worth powder and shot, but I'll be even with you one way or another."

"Stop," interposed Ralph, as Snawley was about to speak. "Let us cut this matter short, and not bandy words here with hare-brained profligates. This is your son, as you can prove — and you, Mr. Squeers, you know this boy to be the same that was with you for so many years under the name of Smike — Do you?"

"Do I!" returned Squeers. "Don't I?"

"Good," said Ralph; "a very few words will be sufficient here. You had a son by your first wife, Mr. Snawley?"

"I had," replied that person, "and there he stands."

"We'll show that presently," said Ralph. "You and your wife were separated, and she had the boy to live with her, when he was a year old. You received a communication from her, when you had lived apart a year or two, that the boy was dead; and you believed it?"

"Of course I did!" returned Snawley. "Oh the joy of" ——

"Be rational, sir, pray," said Ralph. "This is business, and transports interfere with it. This wife died a year and a half ago, or thereabouts — not more — in some obscure place, where she was house-keeper in a family. Is that the case?"

"That's the case," replied Snawley.

"Having written on her death-bed a letter or confession to you, about this very boy, which, as it was not

directed otherwise than in your name, only reached you, and that by a circuitous course, a few days since?"

"Just so," said Snawley. "Correct in every particular, sir."

"And this confession," resumed Ralph, "is to the effect that his death was an invention of hers to wound you — was a part of a system of annoyance, in short, which you seem to have adopted towards each other — that the boy lived, but was of weak and imperfect intellect — that she sent him by a trusty hand to a cheap school in Yorkshire — that she had paid for his education for some years, and then, being poor, and going a long way off, gradually deserted him, for which she prayed forgiveness?"

Snawley nodded his head, and wiped his eyes; the first slightly, the last violently.

"The school was Mr. Squeers's," continued Ralph; "the boy was left there in the name of Smike; every description was fully given, dates tally exactly with Mr. Squeers's books, Mr. Squeers is lodging with you at this time; you have two other boys at his school: you communicated the whole discovery to him, he brought you to me as the person who had recommended to him the kidnapper of his child; and I brought you here. Is that so?"

"You talk like a good book, sir, that's got nothing in its inside but what's the truth," replied Snawley.

"This is your pocket-book," said Ralph, producing one from his coat; "the certificates of your first marriage and of the boy's birth, and your wife's two letters, and every other paper that can support these statements directly or by implication, are here, are they?"

"Every one of 'em, sir."

"And you don't object to their being looked at here, so that these people may be convinced of your power to substantiate your claim at once in law and reason, and you may resume your control over your own son without more delay. Do I understand you?"

"I couldn't have understood myself better, sir."

"There, then," said Ralph, tossing the pocket-book upon the table. "Let them see them if they like; and as those are the original papers, I should recommend you to stand near while they are being examined, or you may chance to lose some."

With these words Ralph sat down unbidden, and compressing his lips, which were for the moment slightly parted by a smile, folded his arms, and looked for the first time at his nephew.

Nicholas, stung by the concluding taunt, darted an indignant glance at him; but commanding himself as well as he could, entered upon a close examination of the documents, at which John Browdie assisted. There was nothing about them which could be called in question. The certificates were regularly signed as extracts from the parish books, the first letter had a genuine appearance of having been written and preserved for some years, the handwriting of the second tallied with it exactly, (making proper allowance for its having been written by a person in extremity,) and there were several other corroboratory scraps of entries and memoranda which it was equally difficult to question.

"Dear Nicholas," whispered Kate, who had been looking anxiously over his shoulder, "can this be really the case? Is this statement true?"

"I fear it is," answered Nicholas. "What say you, John?"

John scratched his head and shook it, but said nothing at all.

"You will observe, ma'am," said Ralph, addressing himself to Mrs. Nickleby, "that this boy being a minor and not of strong mind, we might have come here to-night, armed with the powers of the law, and backed by a troop of its myrmidons. I should have done so, ma'am, unquestionably, but for my regard for the feelings of yourself — and your daughter."

"You have shown your regard for *her* feelings well," said Nicholas, drawing his sister towards him.

"Thank you," replied Ralph. "Your praise, sir, is commendation, indeed."

"Well," said Squeers, "what's to be done? Them hackney-coach horses will catch cold if we don't think of moving; there's one of 'em a-sneezing now, so that he blows the street-door right open. What's the order of the day — eh? Is Master Snawley to come along with us?"

"No, no, no," replied Smike, drawing back, and clinging to Nicholas. "No. Pray, no. I will not go from you with him. No, no."

"This is a cruel thing," said Snawley, looking to his friends for support. "Do parents bring children into the world for this?"

"Do parents bring children into the world for *thot?*" said John Browdie bluntly, pointing, as he spoke, to Squeers.

"Never you mind," retorted that gentleman, tapping his nose, derisively.

"Never I mind!" said John, "no, nor never nobody mind, say'st thou, school-measther. It's nobody's minding that keeps sike men as thou afloat. Noo then, where

be'st thou coomin' to? Dang it, dinnot coom treadin' ower me, mun."

Suiting the action to the word, John Browdie just jerked his elbow into the chest of Mr. Squeers who was advancing upon Smike; with so much dexterity that the school-master reeled and staggered back upon Ralph Nickleby, and being unable to recover his balance, knocked that gentleman off his chair, and stumbled heavily upon him.

This accidental circumstance was the signal for some very decisive proceedings. In the midst of a great noise, occasioned by the prayers and entreaties of Smike, the cries and exclamations of the women, and the vehemence of the men, demonstrations were made of carrying off the lost son by violence: and Squeers had actually begun to haul him out, when Nicholas (who, until then, had been evidently undecided how to act) took him by the collar, and shaking him so that such teeth as he had, chattered in his head, politely escorted him to the room-door, and thrusting him into the passage, shut it upon him.

"Now," said Nicholas to the other two, "have the kindness to follow your friend."

"I want my son," said Snawley.

"Your son," replied Nicholas, "chooses for himself. He chooses to remain here, and he shall."

"You won't give him up?" said Snawley.

"I would not give him up against his will, to be the victim of such brutality as that to which you would consign him," replied Nicholas, "if he were a dog or a rat."

"Knock that Nickleby down with a candlestick," cried Mr. Squeers, through the key-hole, "and bring out my hat, somebody, will you, unless he wants to steal it."

"I am very sorry, indeed," said Mrs. Nickleby, who, with Mrs. Browdie, had stood crying and biting her fingers in a corner, while Kate — very pale, but perfectly quiet — had kept as near her brother as she could. "I am very sorry, indeed, for all this. I really don't know what would be best to do, and that's the truth. Nicholas ought to be the best judge, and I hope he is. Of course, it's a hard thing to have to keep other people's children, though young Mr. Snawley is certainly as useful and willing as it's possible for anybody to be; but, if it could be settled in any friendly manner — if old Mr. Snawley, for instance, would settle to pay something certain for his board and lodging, and some fair arrangement was come to, so that we undertook to have fish twice a week, and a pudding twice, or a dumpling, or something of that sort, I do think that it might be very satisfactory and pleasant for all parties."

This compromise, which was proposed with abundance of tears and sighs, not exactly meeting the point at issue, nobody took any notice of it; and poor Mrs. Nickleby accordingly proceeded to enlighten Mrs. Browdie upon the advantages of such a scheme, and the unhappy results flowing, on all occasions, from her not being attended to when she proffered her advice.

"You, sir," said Snawley, addressing the terrified Smike, "are an unnatural, ungrateful, unlovable boy. You won't let me love you when I want to. Won't you come home — won't you?"

"No, no, no," cried Smike, shrinking back.

"He never loved nobody," bawled Squeers, through the key-hole. "He never loved me; he never loved Wackford, who is next door but one to a cherubim. How can you expect that he'll love his father? He'll

never love his father, he won't. He don't know what it is to have a father. He don't understand it. It a'n't in him."

Mr. Snawley looked steadfastly at his son for a full minute, and then covering his eyes with his hand, and once more raising his hat in the air, appeared deeply occupied in deploring his black ingratitude. Then drawing his arm across his eyes, he picked up Mr. Squeers's hat, and taking it under one arm, and his own under the other, walked slowly and sadly out.

"Your romance, sir," said Ralph, lingering for a moment, "is destroyed, I take it. No unknown; no persecuted descendant of a man of high degree; but the weak, imbecile son of a poor, petty tradesman. We shall see how your sympathy melts before plain matter of fact."

"You shall," said Nicholas, motioning towards the door.

"And trust me, sir," added Ralph, "that I never supposed you would give him up to-night. Pride, obstinacy, reputation for fine feeling, were all against it. These must be brought down, sir, lowered, crushed, as they shall be soon. The protracted and wearing anxiety and expense of the law in its most oppressive form, its torture from hour to hour, its weary days and sleepless nights — with these I'll prove you, and break your haughty spirit, strong as you deem it now. And when you make this house a hell, and visit these trials upon yonder wretched object (as you will; I know you), and those who think you now a young-fledged hero, we'll go into old accounts between us two, and see who stands the debtor, and comes out best at last — even before the world."

Ralph Nickleby withdrew. But Mr. Squeers, who had heard a portion of this closing address, and was by this time wound up to a pitch of impotent malignity almost unprecedented, could not refrain from returning to the parlor-door, and actually cutting some dozen capers with various wry faces and hideous grimaces, expressive of his triumphant confidence in the downfall and defeat of Nicholas.

Having concluded this war-dance, in which his short trousers and large boots had borne a very conspicuous figure, Mr. Squeers followed his friends, and the family were left to meditate upon recent occurrences.

CHAPTER XLVI.

THROWS SOME LIGHT UPON NICHOLAS'S LOVE; BUT WHETHER FOR GOOD OR EVIL THE READER MUST DETERMINE.

After an anxious consideration of the painful and embarrassing position in which he was placed, Nicholas decided that he ought to lose no time in frankly stating it to the kind brothers. Availing himself of the first opportunity of being alone with Mr. Charles Cheeryble at the close of next day, he accordingly related Smike's little history, and modestly but firmly expressed his hope that the good old gentleman would, under such circumstances as he described, hold him justified in adopting the extreme course of interfering between parent and child, and upholding the latter in his disobedience; even though his horror and dread of his father might seem, and would doubtless be represented as, a thing so repulsive and unnatural, as to render those who countenanced him in it, fit objects of general detestation and abhorrence.

"So deeply-rooted does this horror of the man appear to be," said Nicholas, "that I can hardly believe he really is his son. Nature does not seem to have implanted in his breast one lingering feeling of affection for him, and surely she can never err."

"My dear sir," replied brother Charles, "you fall into the very common mistake of charging upon Nature, matters with which she has not the smallest connection, and for which she is in no way responsible. Men talk of nature as an abstract thing, and lose sight of what is natural while they do so. Here is a poor lad who has never felt a parent's care, who has scarcely known anything all his life but suffering and sorrow, presented to a man who he is told is his father, and whose first act is to signify his intention of putting an end to his short term of happiness: of consigning him to his old fate, and taking him from the only friend he has ever had — which is yourself. If Nature, in such a case, put into that lad's breast but one secret prompting which urged him towards his father and away from you, she would be a liar and an idiot."

Nicholas was delighted to find that the old gentleman spoke so warmly, and in the hope that he might say something more to the same purpose made no reply.

"The same mistake presents itself to me, in one shape or other, at every turn," said brother Charles. "Parents who never showed their love, complain of want of natural affection in their children — children who never showed their duty, complain of want of natural feeling in their parents — lawmakers who find both so miserable that their affections have never had enough of life's sun to develop them, are loud in their moralizings over parents and children too, and cry that the very ties of nature are disregarded. Natural affections and instincts, my dear sir, are the most beautiful of the Almighty's works, but like other beautiful works of His, they must be reared and fostered, or it is as natural that they should be wholly obscured, and that new feelings should

usurp their place, as it is that the sweetest productions of the earth, left untended, should be choked with weeds and briers. I wish we could be brought to consider this, and remembering natural obligations a little more at the right time, talk about them a little less at the wrong one."

After this, brother Charles, who had talked himself into a great heat, stopped to cool a little, and then continued: —

"I dare say you are surprised, my dear sir, that I have listened to your recital with so little astonishment. That is easily explained — your uncle has been here this morning."

Nicholas colored, and drew back a step or two.

"Yes," said the old gentleman, tapping his desk emphatically, "here — in this room. He would listen neither to reason, feeling, nor justice. But brother Ned was hard upon him — brother Ned, sir, might have melted a paving-stone."

"He came to" —— said Nicholas.

"To complain of you," returned brother Charles, "to poison our ears with calumnies and falsehoods; but he came on a fruitless errand, and went away with some wholesome truths in his ear besides. Brother Ned, my dear Mr. Nickleby — brother Ned, sir, is a perfect lion. So is Tim Linkinwater — Tim is quite a lion. We had Tim in to face him at first, and Tim was at him, sir, before you could say 'Jack Robinson.'"

"How can I ever thank you, for all the deep obligations you impose upon me every day?" said Nicholas.

"By keeping silence upon the subject, my dear sir," returned brother Charles. "You shall be righted. At

least you shall not be wronged. Nobody belonging to you shall be wronged. They shall not hurt a hair of your head, or the boy's head, or your mother's head, or your sister's head. I have said it, brother Ned has said it, Tim Linkinwater has said it. We have all said it, and we'll all do it. I have seen the father — if he is the father — and I suppose he must be. He is a barbarian and a hypocrite, Mr. Nickleby. I told him, 'You are a barbarian, sir.' I did. I said, 'You're a barbarian, sir.' And I'm glad of it — I am *very* glad I told him he was a barbarian — very glad, indeed!"

By this time brother Charles was in such a very warm state of indignation, that Nicholas thought he might venture to put in a word, but the moment he essayed to do so, Mr. Cheeryble laid his hand softly upon his arm, and pointed to a chair.

"The subject is at an end for the present," said the old gentleman, wiping his face. "Don't revive it by a single word. I am going to speak upon another subject — a confidential subject, Mr. Nickleby. We must be cool again, we must be cool."

After two or three turns across the room he resumed his seat, and drawing his chair nearer to that on which Nicholas was seated, said —

"I am about to employ you, my dear sir, on a confidential and delicate mission."

"You might employ many a more able messenger, sir," said Nicholas, "but a more trustworthy or zealous one, I may be bold to say, you could not find."

"Of that I am well assured," returned brother Charles, "well assured. You will give me credit for thinking so, when I tell you, that the object of this mission is a young lady."

"A young lady, sir!" cried Nicholas, quite trembling for the moment with his eagerness to hear more.

"A very beautiful young lady," said Mr. Cheeryble, gravely.

"Pray go on, sir," returned Nicholas.

"I am thinking how to do so," said brother Charles — sadly, as it seemed to his young friend, and with an expression allied to pain. "You accidentally saw a young lady in this room one morning, my dear sir, in a fainting fit. Do you remember? Perhaps you have forgotten" ——

"Oh no," replied Nicholas, hurriedly. "I — I — remember it very well indeed."

"*She* is the lady I speak of," said brother Charles. Like the famous parrot, Nicholas thought a great deal, but was unable to utter a word.

"She is the daughter," said Mr. Cheeryble, "of a lady who, when she was a beautiful girl herself, and I was very many years younger, I — it seems a strange word for me to utter now — I loved very dearly. You will smile, perhaps, to hear a gray-headed man talk about such things: you will not offend me, for when I was as young as you, I dare say I should have done the same."

"I have no such inclination, indeed," said Nicholas.

"My dear brother Ned," continued Mr. Cheeryble, "was to have married her sister, but she died. She is dead too now, and has been for many years. She married — her choice; and I wish I could add that her after-life was as happy, as God knows I ever prayed it might be!"

A short silence intervened, which Nicholas made no effort to break.

"If trial and calamity had fallen as lightly on his head, as in the deepest truth of my own heart I ever hoped (for her sake) it would, his life would have been

one of peace and happiness," said the old gentleman, calmly. "It will be enough to say that this was not the case — that she was not happy — that they fell into complicated distresses and difficulties — that she came, twelve months before her death, to appeal to my old friendship ; sadly changed, sadly altered, broken-spirited from suffering and ill-usage, and almost broken-hearted. He readily availed himself of the money which, to give her but one hour's peace of mind, I would have poured out as freely as water — nay, he often sent her back for more — and yet even while he squandered it, he made the very success of these, her applications to me, the groundwork of cruel taunts and jeers, protesting that he knew she thought with bitter remorse of the choice she had made, that she had married him from motives of interest and vanity (he was a gay young man with great friends about him when she chose him for her husband), and venting in short upon her, by every unjust and unkind means, the bitterness of that ruin and disappointment which had been brought about by his profligacy alone. In those times this young lady was a mere child. I never saw her again until that morning when you saw her also, but my nephew, Frank" ——

Nicholas started, and indistinctly apologizing for the interruption, begged his patron to proceed.

"My nephew, Frank, I say," resumed Mr. Cheeryble, "encountered her by accident, and lost sight of her almost in a minute afterwards, within two days after he returned to England. Her father lay in some secret place to avoid his creditors, reduced, between sickness and poverty, to the verge of death, and she, a child, — we might almost think, if we did not know the wisdom

of all Heaven's decrees — who should have blessed a better man, was steadily braving privation, degradation, and everything most terrible to such a young and delicate creature's heart, for the purpose of supporting him. She was attended, sir," said brother Charles, "in these reverses, by one faithful creature, who had been, in old times, a poor kitchen wench in the family, who was then their solitary servant, but who might have been, for the truth and fidelity of her heart — who might have been — ah! the wife of Tim Linkinwater himself, sir!"

Pursuing this encomium upon the poor follower with such energy and relish as no words can describe, brother Charles leant back in his chair, and delivered the remainder of his relation with greater composure.

It was in substance this: — That proudly resisting all offers of permanent aid and support from her late mother's friends, because they were made conditional upon her quitting the wretched man, her father, who had no friends left, and shrinking with instinctive delicacy from appealing in their behalf to that true and noble heart which he hated, and had, through its greatest and purest goodness, deeply wronged by misconstruction and ill report, this young girl had struggled alone and unassisted to maintain him by the labor of her hands. That through the utmost depths of poverty and affliction she had toiled, never turning aside for an instant from her task, never wearied by the petulant gloom of a sick man sustained by no consoling recollections of the past or hopes of the future; never repining for the comforts she had rejected, or bewailing the hard lot she had voluntarily incurred. That every little accomplishment she had acquired in happier days had been put into requisition for this purpose, and directed to this one end. That

for two long years, toiling by day and often too by night, working at the needle, the pencil, and the pen, and submitting, as a daily governess, to such caprices and indignities as women (with daughters too) too often love to inflict upon their own sex when they serve in such capacities, as though in jealousy of the superior intelligence which they are necessitated to employ, — indignities, in ninety-nine cases out of every hundred, heaped upon persons immeasurably and incalculably their betters, but outweighing in comparison any that the most heartless blackleg would put upon his groom — that for two long years, by dint of laboring in all these capacities and wearying in none, she had not succeeded in the sole aim and object of her life, but that, overwhelmed by accumulated difficulties and disappointments, she had been compelled to seek out her mother's old friend, and, with a bursting heart, to confide in him at last.

"If I had been poor," said brother Charles, with sparkling eyes; "If I had been poor, Mr. Nickleby, my dear sir, which thank God I am not, I would have denied myself — of course anybody would under such circumstances — the commonest necessaries of life, to help her. As it is, the task is a difficult one. If her father were dead, nothing could be easier, for then she should share and cheer the happiest home that brother Ned and I could have, as if she were our child or sister. But he is still alive. Nobody can help him — that has been tried a thousand times; he was not abandoned by all without good cause, I know."

"Cannot she be persuaded to" —— Nicholas hesitated when he had got thus far.

"To leave him?" said brother Charles. "Who could entreat a child to desert her parent? Such en-

treaties, limited to her seeing him occasionally, have been urged upon her — not by me — but always with the same result."

"Is he kind to her?" said Nicholas. "Does he requite her affection?"

"True kindness, considerate self-denying kindness, is not in his nature," returned Mr. Cheeryble. "Such kindness as he knows, he regards her with, I believe. The mother was a gentle, loving, confiding creature, and although he wounded her from their marriage till her death as cruelly and wantonly as ever man did, she never ceased to love him. She commended him on her death-bed to her child's care. Her child has never forgotten it, and never will."

"Have you no influence over him?" asked Nicholas.

"I, my dear sir! The last man in the world. Such is his jealousy and hatred of me, that if he knew his daughter had opened her heart to me, he would render her life miserable with his reproaches; although — this is the inconsistency and selfishness of his character — although if he knew that every penny she had came from me, he would not relinquish one personal desire that the most reckless expenditure of her scanty stock could gratify."

"An unnatural scoundrel!" said Nicholas, indignantly.

"We will use no harsh terms," said brother Charles, in a gentle voice; "but accommodate ourselves to the circumstances in which this young lady is placed. Such assistance as I have prevailed upon her to accept, I have been obliged, at her own earnest request, to dole out in the smallest portions, lest he, finding how easily money was procured, should squander it even more lightly than

he is accustomed to do. She has come to and fro, to and fro, secretly and by night, to take even this ; and I cannot bear that things should go on in this way, Mr. Nickleby — I really cannot bear it."

Then it came out by little and little, how that the twins had been revolving in their good old heads manifold plans and schemes for helping this young lady in the most delicate and considerate way, and so that her father should not suspect the source whence the aid was derived ; and how they had at last come to the conclusion, that the best course would be to make a feint of purchasing her little drawings and ornamental work at a high price, and keeping up a constant demand for the same. For the furtherance of which end and object it was necessary that somebody should represent the dealer in such commodities, and after great deliberation they had pitched upon Nicholas to support this character.

"He knows me," said brother Charles, "and he knows my brother Ned. Neither of us would do. Frank is a very good fellow — a very fine fellow — but we are afraid that he might be a little flighty and thoughtless in such a delicate matter, and that he might, perhaps — that he might, in short, be too susceptible (for she is a beautiful creature, sir ; just what her poor mother was), and falling in love with her before he well knew his own mind, carry pain and sorrow into that innocent breast, which we would be the humble instruments of gradually making happy. He took an extraordinary interest in her fortunes when he first happened to encounter her ; and we gather from the inquiries we have made of him, that it was she in whose behalf he made that turmoil which led to your first acquaintance."

Nicholas stammered out that he had before suspected

the possibility of such a thing; and in explanation of its having occurred to him, described when and where he had seen the young lady himself.

"Well; then you see," continued brother Charles, "that *he* wouldn't do. Tim Linkinwater is out of the question; for Tim, sir, is such a tremendous fellow, that he could never contain himself, but would go to loggerheads with the father before he had been in the place five minutes. You don't know what Tim is, sir, when he is roused by anything that appeals to his feelings very strongly — then he is terrific, sir, is Tim Linkinwater — absolutely terrific. Now, in you we can repose the strictest confidence; in you we have seen — or at least *I* have seen, and that's the same thing, for there's no difference between me and my brother Ned, except that he is the finest creature that ever lived, and that there is not, and never will be, anybody like him in all the world — in you we have seen domestic virtues and affections, and delicacy of feeling, which exactly qualify you for such an office. And you are the man, sir."

"The young lady, sir," said Nicholas, who felt so embarrassed that he had no small difficulty in saying anything at all — "Does — is — is she a party to this innocent deceit?"

"Yes, yes," returned Mr. Cheeryble; "at least she knows you come from us; she does *not* know, however, but that we shall dispose of these little productions that you'll purchase from time to time; and, perhaps, if you did it very well (that is, *very* well indeed), perhaps she might be brought to believe that we — that we made a profit of them. Eh? — Eh?"

In this guileless and most kind simplicity, brother Charles was so happy, and in this possibility of the

young lady being led to think that she was under no obligation to him, he evidently felt so sanguine and had so much delight, that Nicholas would not breathe a doubt upon the subject.

All this time, however, there hovered upon the tip of his tongue a confession that the very same objections which Mr. Cheeryble had stated to the employment of his nephew in this commission applied with at least equal force and validity to himself, and a hundred times had he been upon the point of avowing the real state of his feelings, and entreating to be released from it. But as often, treading upon the heels of this impulse, came another which urged him to refrain, and to keep his secret to his own breast. "Why should I," thought Nicholas, "why should I throw difficulties in the way of this benevolent and high-minded design? What if I do love and reverence this good and lovely creature — should I not appear a most arrogant and shallow coxcomb if I gravely represented that there was any danger of her falling in love with me? Besides, have I no confidence in myself? Am I not now bound in honor to repress these thoughts? Has not this excellent man a right to my best and heartiest services, and should any considerations of self deter me from rendering them?"

Asking himself such questions as these, Nicholas mentally answered with great emphasis "No!" and persuading himself that he was a most conscientious and glorious martyr, nobly resolved to do what, if he had examined his own heart a little more carefully, he would have found, he could not resist. Such is the sleight of hand by which we juggle with ourselves, and change our very weaknesses into stanch and most magnanimous virtues!

Mr. Cheeryble, being of course wholly unsuspicious

that such reflections were presenting themselves to his young friend, proceeded to give him the needful credentials and directions for his first visit, which was to be made next morning; and all preliminaries being arranged, and the strictest secrecy enjoined, Nicholas walked home for the night very thoughtfully indeed.

The place to which Mr. Cheeryble had directed him was a row of mean and not over-cleanly houses, situated within "the Rules" of the King's Bench Prison, and not many hundred paces distant from the obelisk in Saint George's Fields. The Rules are a certain liberty adjoining the prison, and comprising some dozen streets in which debtors who can raise money to pay large fees, from which their creditors do *not* derive any benefit, are permitted to reside by the wise provisions of the same enlightened laws which leave the debtor who can raise no money to starve in jail, without the food, clothing, lodging, or warmth, which are provided for felons convicted of the most atrocious crimes that can disgrace humanity. There are many pleasant fictions of the law in constant operation, but there is not one so pleasant or practically humorous as that which supposes every man to be of equal value in its impartial eye, and the benefits of all laws to be equally attainable by all men, without the smallest reference to the furniture of their pockets.

To the row of houses indicated to him by Mr. Charles Cheeryble, Nicholas directed his steps, without much troubling his head with such matters as these; and at this row of houses — after traversing a very dirty and dusty suburb, of which minor theatricals, shell-fish, ginger-beer, spring vans, green-grocery, and brokers' shops, appeared to compose the main and most prominent features — he at length arrived with a palpitating heart.

There were small gardens in front which, being wholly neglected in all other respects, served as little pens for the dust to collect in, until the wind came round the corner and blew it down the road. Opening the rickety gate which, dangling on its broken hinges before one of these, half admitted and half repulsed the visitor, Nicholas knocked at the street-door with a faltering hand.

It was in truth a shabby house outside, with very dim parlor-windows and very small show of blinds, and very dirty muslin curtains dangling across the lower panes on very loose and limp strings. Neither, when the door was opened, did the inside appear to belie the outward promise, as there was faded carpeting on the stairs and faded oil-cloth in the passage; in addition to which discomforts a gentleman Ruler was smoking hard in the front parlor (though it was not yet noon), while the lady of the house was busily engaged in turpentining the disjointed fragments of a tent-bedstead at the door of the back-parlor, as if in preparation for the reception of some new lodger who had been fortunate enough to engage it.

Nicholas had ample time to make these observations while the little boy, who went on errands for the lodgers, clattered down the kitchen-stairs and was heard to scream, as in some remote cellar, for Miss Bray's servant, who, presently appearing and requesting him to follow her, caused him to evince greater symptoms of nervousness and disorder than so natural a consequence of his having inquired for that young lady would seem calculated to occasion.

Up-stairs he went, however, and into a front room he was shown, and there, seated at a little table by the window, on which were drawing materials with which she

was occupied, sat the beautiful girl who had so engrossed his thoughts, and who, surrounded by all the new and strong interest which Nicholas attached to her story, seemed now, in his eyes, a thousand times more beautiful than he had ever yet supposed her.

But how the graces and elegances which she had dispersed about the poorly-furnished room, went to the heart of Nicholas! Flowers, plants, birds, the harp, the old piano whose notes had sounded so much sweeter in bygone times — how many struggles had it cost her to keep these two last links of that broken chain which bound her yet to home! With every slender ornament, the occupation of her leisure hours, replete with that graceful charm which lingers in every little tasteful work of woman's hands, how much patient endurance and how many gentle affections were intwined! He felt as though the smile of Heaven were on the little chamber; as though the beautiful devotion of so young and weak a creature, had shed a ray of its own on the inanimate things around and made them beautiful as itself; as though the halo with which old painters surround the bright angels of a sinless world played about a being akin in spirit to them, and its light were visibly before him.

And yet Nicholas was in the Rules of the King's Bench Prison! If he had been in Italy indeed, and the time had been sunset, and the scene a stately terrace; — but, there is one broad sky over all the world, and whether it be blue or cloudy, the same heaven beyond it, so, perhaps, he had no need of compunction for thinking as he did.

It is not to be supposed that he took in everything at one glance, for he had as yet been unconscious of the

presence of a sick man propped up with pillows in an easy-chair, who moving restlessly and impatiently in his seat, attracted his attention.

He was scarce fifty, perhaps, but so emaciated as to appear much older. His features presented the remains of a handsome countenance, but one in which the embers of strong and impetuous passions were easier to be traced than any expression which would have rendered a far plainer face much more prepossessing. His looks were very haggard, and his limbs and body literally worn to the bone, but there was something of the old fire in the large sunken eye notwithstanding, and it seemed to kindle afresh as he struck a thick stick, with which he seemed to have supported himself in his seat, impatiently on the floor twice or thrice, and called his daughter by her name.

"Madeline, who is this — what does anybody want here — who told a stranger we could be seen? What is it?"

"I believe" —— the young lady began, as she inclined her head with an air of some confusion, in reply to the salutation of Nicholas.

"You always believe," returned her father, petulantly. "What is it?"

By this time Nicholas had recovered sufficient presence of mind to speak for himself, so he said (as it had been agreed he should say) that he had called about a pair of hand-screens, and some painted velvet for an ottoman, both of which were required to be of the most elegant design possible, neither time nor expense being of the smallest consideration. He had also to pay for the two drawings, with many thanks, and, advancing to the little table, he laid upon it a bank-note, folded in an envelope and sealed.

"See that the money is right, Madeline," said the father, "open the paper, my dear."

"It's quite right, papa, I'm sure."

"Here!" said Mr. Bray, putting out his hand, and opening and shutting his bony fingers with irritable impatience. "Let me see. What are you talking about, Madeline — you're sure — how can you be sure of any such thing — five pounds — well, is *that* right?"

"Quite," said Madeline, bending over him. She was so busily employed in arranging the pillows that Nicholas could not see her face, but as she stooped he thought he saw a tear fall.

"Ring the bell, ring the bell," said the sick man, with the same nervous eagerness, and motioning towards it with such a quivering hand that the bank-note rustled in the air. "Tell her to get it changed — to get me a newspaper — to buy me some grapes — another bottle of the wine that I had last week — and — and — I forget half I want just now, but she can go out again. Let her get those first — those first. Now, Madeline, my love, quick, quick! Good God, how slow you are!"

"He remembers nothing that *she* wants!" thought Nicholas. Perhaps something of what he thought was expressed in his countenance, for the sick man turning towards him with great asperity, demanded to know if he waited for a receipt.

"It is no matter at all," said Nicholas.

"No matter! what do you mean, sir?" was the tart rejoinder. "No matter! Do you think you bring your paltry money here as a favor or a gift; or as a matter of business, and in return for value received? D — n you, sir, because you can't appreciate the time and taste

which are bestowed upon the goods you deal in, do you think you give your money away? Do you know that you are talking to a gentleman, sir, who at one time could have bought up fifty such men as you and all you have? What do you mean?"

"I merely mean that as I shall have many dealings with this lady, if she will kindly allow me, I will not trouble her with such forms," said Nicholas.

"Then *I* mean, if you please, that we'll have as many forms as we can," returned the father. "My daughter, sir, requires no kindness from you or anybody else. Have the goodness to confine your dealings strictly to trade and business, and not to travel beyond it. Every petty tradesman is to begin to pity her now, is he? Upon my soul! Very pretty. Madeline, my dear, give him a receipt; and mind you always do so."

While she was feigning to write it, and Nicholas was ruminating upon the extraordinary but by no means uncommon character thus presented to his observation, the invalid, who appeared at times to suffer great bodily pain, sunk back in his chair and moaned out a feeble complaint that the girl had been gone an hour, and that everybody conspired to goad him.

"When," said Nicholas, as he took the piece of paper, "when shall I — call again?"

This was addressed to the daughter, but the father answered immediately —

"When you're requested to call, sir, and not before. Don't worry and persecute. Madeline, my dear, when is this person to call again?"

"Oh, not for a long time — not for three or four weeks — it is not necessary, indeed — I can do without," said the young lady, with great eagerness.

"Why, how are we to do without?" urged her father, not speaking above his breath. "Three or four weeks, Madeline! Three or four weeks!"

"Then sooner, — sooner, if you please," said the young lady, turning to Nicholas.

"Three or four weeks!" muttered the father. "Madeline, what on earth — do nothing for three or four weeks!"

"It is a long time, ma'am," said Nicholas.

"*You* think so, do you?" retorted the father, angrily. "If I chose to beg, sir, and stoop to ask assistance from people I despise, three or four months would not be a long time — three or four years would not be a long time. Understand, sir, that is if I chose to be dependent; but as I don't, you may call in a week."

Nicholas bowed low to the young lady and retired, pondering upon Mr. Bray's ideas of independence, and devoutly hoping that there might be few such independent spirits as he mingling with the baser clay of humanity.

He heard a light footstep above him as he descended the stairs, and looking round saw that the young lady was standing there, and glancing timidly towards him, seemed to hesitate whether she should call him back or no. The best way of settling the question was to turn back at once, which Nicholas did.

"I don't know whether I do right in asking you, sir," said Madeline, hurriedly, "but pray — pray — do not mention to my poor mother's dear friends what has passed here to-day. He has suffered much, and is worse this morning. I beg you, sir, as a boon, a favor to myself."

"You have but to hint a wish," returned Nicholas fervently, "and I would hazard my life to gratify it."

"You speak hastily, sir."

"Truly and sincerely," rejoined Nicholas, his lips trembling as he formed the words, "if ever man spoke truly yet. I am not skilled in disguising my feelings, and if I were, I could not hide my heart from you. Dear madam, as I know your history, and feel as men and angels must who hear and see such things, I do entreat you to believe that I would die to serve you."

The young lady turned away her head, and was plainly weeping.

"Forgive me," said Nicholas, with respectful earnestness, "if I seem to say too much, or to presume upon the confidence which has been intrusted to me. But I could not leave you as if my interest and sympathy expired with the commission of the day. I am your faithful servant, humbly devoted to you from this hour — devoted in strict truth and honor to him who sent me here, and in pure integrity of heart, and distant respect for you. If I meant more or less than this, I should be unworthy his regard, and false to the very nature that prompts the honest words I utter."

She waved her hand, entreating him to be gone, but answered not a word. Nicholas could say no more, and silently withdrew. And thus ended his first interview with Madeline Bray.

CHAPTER XLVII.

MR. RALPH NICKLEBY HAS SOME CONFIDENTIAL INTERCOURSE WITH ANOTHER OLD FRIEND. THEY CONCERT BETWEEN THEM A PROJECT, WHICH PROMISES WELL FOR BOTH.

"THERE go the three quarters past!" muttered Newman Noggs, listening to the chimes of some neighboring church, "and my dinner-time's two. He does it on purpose. He makes a point of it. It's just like him."

It was in his own little den of an office and on the top of his official stool that Newman thus soliloquized; and the soliloquy referred, as Newman's grumbling soliloquies usually did, to Ralph Nickleby.

"I don't believe he ever had an appetite," said Newman, "except for pounds, shillings, and pence, and with them he's as greedy as a wolf. I should like to have him compelled to swallow one of every English coin. The penny would be an awkward morsel — but the crown — ha! ha!"

His good-humor being in some degree restored by the vision of Ralph Nickleby swallowing, perforce, a five-shilling-piece, Newman slowly brought forth from his desk one of those portable bottles, currently known as pocket-pistols, and shaking the same close to his ear so as to produce a rippling sound very cool and pleas-

ant to listen to, suffered his features to relax, and took a gurgling drink, which relaxed them still more. Replacing the cork he smacked his lips twice or thrice with an air of great relish, and, the taste of the liquor having by this time evaporated, recurred to his grievances again.

"Five minutes to three," growled Newman, "it can't want more by this time; and I had my breakfast at eight o'clock, and *such* a breakfast! and my right dinner time two! And I might have a nice little bit of hot roast meat spoiling at home all this time — how does *he* know I haven't! 'Don't go till I come back,' 'Don't go till I come back,' day after day. What do you always go out at my dinner-time for then — eh? Don't you know it's nothing but aggravation — eh?"

These words, though uttered in a very loud key, were addressed to nothing but empty air. The recital of his wrongs, however, seemed to have the effect of making Newman Noggs desperate; for he flattened his old hat upon his head, and drawing on the everlasting gloves, declared with great vehemence, that come what might, he would go to dinner that very minute.

Carrying this resolution into instant effect, he had advanced as far as the passage, when the sound of the latch-key in the street-door caused him to make a precipitate retreat into his own office again.

"Here he is," growled Newman, "and somebody with him. Now it'll be 'Stop till this gentleman's gone.' But I won't — that's flat."

So saying, Newman slipped into a tall empty closet which opened with two half doors, and shut himself up; intending to slip out directly Ralph was safe inside his own room.

"Noggs," cried Ralph, "where is that fellow — Noggs."

But not a word said Newman.

"The dog has gone to his dinner, though I told him not," muttered Ralph, looking into the office and pulling out his watch. "Humph! You had better come in here, Gride. My man's out, and the sun is hot upon my room. This is cool and in the shade, if you don't mind roughing it."

"Not at all, Mr. Nickleby, oh not at all. All places are alike to me, sir. Ah! very nice indeed. Oh! very nice!"

The person who made this reply was a little old man, of about seventy or seventy-five years of age, of a very lean figure, much bent, and slightly twisted. He wore a gray coat with a very narrow collar, an old-fashioned waistcoat of ribbed black silk, and such scanty trousers as displayed his shrunken spindle-shanks in their full ugliness. The only articles of display or ornament in his dress, were a steel watch-chain to which were attached some large gold seals; and a black ribbon into which, in compliance with an old fashion scarcely ever observed in these days, his gray hair was gathered behind. His nose and chin were sharp and prominent, his jaws had fallen inwards from loss of teeth, his face was shrivelled and yellow, save where the cheeks were streaked with the color of a dry winter apple; and where his beard had been, there lingered yet a few gray tufts which seemed, like the ragged eyebrows, to denote the badness of the soil from which they sprung. The whole air and attitude of the form, was one of stealthy catlike obsequiousness; the whole expression of the face was concentrated in a wrinkled leer, com-

pounded of cunning, lecherousness, slyness, and avarice.

Such was old Arthur Gride, in whose face there was not a wrinkle, in whose dress there was not one spare fold or plait, but expressed the most covetous and griping penury, and sufficiently indicated his belonging to that class of which Ralph Nickleby was a member. Such was old Arthur Gride, as he sat in a low chair looking up into the face of Ralph Nickleby, who, lounging upon the tall office-stool, with his arms upon his knees, looked down into his, — a match for him on whatever errand he had come.

"And how have you been?" said Gride, feigning great interest in Ralph's state of health. "I haven't seen you for — oh! not for" —

"Not for a long time," said Ralph, with a peculiar smile, importing that he very well knew it was not on a mere visit of compliment that his friend had come. "It was a narrow chance that you saw me now, for I had only just come up to the door as you turned the corner."

"I am very lucky," observed Gride.

"So men say," replied Ralph, dryly.

The older money-lender wagged his chin and smiled, but he originated no new remark, and they sat for some little time without speaking. Each was looking out to take the other at a disadvantage.

"Come, Gride," said Ralph, at length; "what's in the wind to-day?"

"Aha! you're a bold man, Mr. Nickleby," cried the other, apparently very much relieved by Ralph's leading the way to business. "Oh dear, dear, what a bold man you are."

"Why, you have a sleek and slinking way with you

that makes me seem so by contrast," returned Ralph. "I don't know but that yours may answer better, but I want the patience for it."

"You were born a genius, Mr. Nickleby," said old Arthur. "Deep, deep, deep. Ah!"

"Deep enough," retorted Ralph, "to know that I shall need all the depth I have, when men like you begin to compliment. You know I have stood by when you fawned and flattered other people, and I remember pretty well what *that* always led to."

"Ha, ha, ha," rejoined Arthur, rubbing his hands. "So you do, so you do, no doubt. Not a man knows it better. Well, it's a pleasant thing now to think that you remember old times. Oh dear!"

"Now then," said Ralph, composedly; "what's in the wind, I ask again — what is it!"

"See that now!" cried the other. "He can't even keep from business while we're chatting over by-gones. Oh dear, dear, what a man it is!"

"*Which* of the by-gones do you want to revive?" said Ralph. "One of them, I know, or you wouldn't talk about them."

"He suspects even me!" cried old Arthur, holding up his hands. "Even me — oh dear, even me. What a man it is! Ha, ha, ha! What a man it is! Mr. Nickleby against all the world — there's nobody like him. A giant among pigmies — a giant — a giant!"

Ralph looked at the old dog with a quiet smile as he chuckled on in this strain, and Newman Noggs in the closet felt his heart sink within him as the prospect of dinner grew fainter and fainter.

"I must humor him though," cried old Arthur; "he must have his way — a wilful man, as the Scotch say —

well, well, they're a wise people, the Scotch — he will talk about business, and won't give away his time for nothing. He's very right. Time is money — time is money."

"He was one of us who made that saying, I should think," said Ralph. "Time is money, and very good money too, to those who reckon interest by it. Time *is* money! Yes, and time costs money — it's rather an expensive article to some people we could name, or I forget my trade."

In rejoinder to this sally, old Arthur again raised his hands, again chuckled, and again ejaculated "What a man it is!" which done, he dragged the low chair a little nearer to Ralph's high stool, and looking upwards into his immovable face, said,

"What would you say to me, if I was to tell you that I was — that I was — going to be married?"

"I should tell you," replied Ralph, looking coldly down upon him, "that for some purpose of your own you told a lie, and that it wasn't the first time and wouldn't be the last; that I wasn't surprised and wasn't to be taken in."

"Then I tell you seriously that I am," said old Arthur.

"And *I* tell you seriously," rejoined Ralph, "what I told you this minute. Stay. Let me look at you. There's a liquorish devilry in your face — what is this?"

"I wouldn't deceive *you*, you know," whined Arthur Gride; "I couldn't do it, I should be mad to try. I — I — to deceive Mr. Nickleby! The pigmy to impose upon the giant. I ask again — he, he, he! — what should you say to me if I was to tell you that I was going to be married?"

"To some old hag?" said Ralph.

"No, no," cried Arthur, interrupting him, and rubbing his hands in an ecstasy. "Wrong, wrong again. Mr. Nickleby for once at fault — out, quite out! To a young and beautiful girl; fresh, lovely, bewitching, and not nineteen. Dark eyes — long eyelashes — ripe and ruddy lips that to look at is to long to kiss — beautiful clustering hair that one's fingers itch to play with — such a waist as might make a man clasp the air involuntarily, thinking of twining his arm about it — little feet that tread so lightly they hardly seem to walk upon the ground — to marry all this, sir, — this — hey, hey!"

"This is something more than common drivelling," said Ralph, after listening with a curled lip to the old sinner's raptures. "The girl's name?"

"Oh deep, deep! See now how deep that is!" exclaimed old Arthur. "He knows I want his help, he knows he can give it me, he knows it must all turn to his advantage, he sees the thing already. Her name — is there nobody within hearing?"

"Why, who the devil should there be?" retorted Ralph, testily.

"I didn't know but that perhaps somebody might be passing up or down the stairs," said Arthur Gride, after looking out at the door and carefully reclosing it; "or but that your man might have come back and might have been listening outside — clerks and servants have a trick of listening, and I should have been very uncomfortable if Mr. Noggs" —

"Curse Mr. Noggs," said Ralph, sharply, "and go on with what you have to say."

"Curse Mr. Noggs, by all means," rejoined old Arthur; "I am sure I have not the least objection to that. Her name is" —

"Well," said Ralph, rendered very irritable by old Arthur's pausing again, "What is it?"

"Madeline Bray."

Whatever reasons there might have been — and Arthur Gride appeared to have anticipated some — for the mention of this name producing an effect upon Ralph, or whatever effect it really did produce upon him, he permitted none to manifest itself, but calmly repeated the name several times, as if reflecting when and where he had heard it before.

"Bray," said Ralph. "Bray — there was young Bray of —— no, he never had a daughter."

"You remember Bray?" rejoined Arthur Gride.

"No," said Ralph, looking vacantly at him.

"Not Walter Bray! The dashing man, who used his handsome wife so ill?"

"If you seek to recall any particular dashing man to my recollection by such a trait as that," said Ralph, shrugging his shoulders, "I shall confound him with nine tenths of the dashing men I have ever known."

"Tut, tut. That Bray who is now in the Rules of the Bench," said old Arthur. "You can't have forgotten Bray. Both of us did business with him. Why, he owes you money" —

"Oh *him!*" rejoined Ralph. "Aye, aye. Now you speak. Oh! It's *his* daughter, is it?"

Naturally as this was said, it was not said so naturally but that a kindred spirit like old Arthur Gride might have discerned a design upon the part of Ralph to lead him on to much more explicit statements and explanations than he would have volunteered, or than Ralph could in all likelihood have obtained by any other means. Old Arthur, however, was so intent upon his own de-

signs, that he suffered himself to be overreached, and had no suspicion but that his good friend was in earnest.

"I knew you couldn't forget him, when you came to think for a moment," he said.

"You were right," answered Ralph. "But old Arthur Gride and matrimony is a most anomalous conjunction of words; old Arthur Gride and dark eyes and eyelashes, and lips that to look at is to long to kiss, and clustering hair that he wants to play with, and waists that he wants to span, and little feet that don't tread upon anything — old Arthur Gride and such things as these is more monstrous still; but old Arthur Gride marrying the daughter of a ruined 'dashing man' in the Rules of the Bench, is the most monstrous and incredible of all. Plainly, friend Arthur Gride, if you want any help from me in this business (which of course you do, or you would not be here), speak out, and to the purpose. And, above all, don't talk to me of its turning to my advantage, for I know it must turn to yours also, and to a good round tune too, or you would have no fingers in such a pie as this."

There was enough acerbity and sarcasm not only in the matter of Ralph's speech, but in the tone of voice in which he uttered it, and the looks with which he eked it out, to have fired even the ancient usurer's cold blood and flushed even his withered cheek. But he gave vent to no demonstration of anger, contenting himself with exclaiming as before, "What a man it is!" and rolling his head from side to side, as if in unrestrained enjoyment of his freedom and drollery. Clearly observing, however, from the expression in Ralph's features, that he had best come to the point as speedily as might be, he composed himself for more serious business, and entered upon the pith and marrow of his negotiation.

First, he dwelt upon the fact that Madeline Bray was devoted to the support and maintenance, and was a slave to every wish, of her only parent, who had no other friend on earth; to which Ralph rejoined that he had heard something of the kind before, and that if she had known a little more of the world, she wouldn't have been such a fool.

Secondly, he enlarged upon the character of her father, arguing, that even taking it for granted that he loved her in return with the utmost affection of which he was capable, yet he loved himself a great deal better; which Ralph said it was quite unnecessary to say anything more about, as that was very natural, and probable enough.

And, thirdly, old Arthur premised that the girl was a delicate and beautiful creature, and that he had really a hankering to have her for his wife. To this Ralph deigned no other rejoinder than a harsh smile, and a glance at the shrivelled old creature before him, which were, however, sufficiently expressive.

"Now," said Gride, "for the little plan I have in my mind to bring this about; because, I haven't offered myself even to the father yet, I should have told you. But that you have gathered already? Ah! oh dear, oh dear, what an edged-tool you are!"

"Don't play with me then," said Ralph, impatiently. "You know the proverb."

"A reply always on the tip of his tongue!" cried old Arthur, raising his hands and eyes in admiration. "He is always prepared! Oh dear, what a blessing to have such a ready wit, and so much ready money to back it!" Then, suddenly changing his tone, he went on:—"I have been backwards and forwards to Bray's lodgings

several times within the last six months. It is just half a year since I first saw this delicate morsel, and, oh dear, what a delicate morsel it is! But that is neither here nor there. I am his detaining creditor for seventeen hundred pounds."

"You talk as if you were the only detaining creditor," said Ralph, pulling out his pocket-book. "I am another for nine hundred and seventy-five pounds four and threepence."

"The only other, Mr. Nickleby," said old Arthur, eagerly. "The only other. Nobody else went to the expense of lodging a detainer, trusting to our holding him fast enough, I warrant you. We both fell into the same snare — oh, dear, what a pitfall it was; it almost ruined me! And lent him our money upon bills, with only one name besides his own, which to be sure everybody supposed to be a good one, and was as negotiable as money, but which turned out — you know how. Just as we should have come upon him, he died insolvent. Ah! it went very nigh to ruin me, that loss did!"

"Go on with your scheme," said Ralph. "It's of no use raising the cry of our trade just now; there's nobody to hear us."

"It's always as well to talk that way," returned old Arthur, with a chuckle, "whether there's anybody to hear us or not. Practice makes perfect, you know. Now, if I offer myself to Bray as his son-in-law, upon one simple condition that the moment I am fast married he shall be quietly released, and have an allowance to live just t'other side the water like a gentleman (he can't live long, for I have asked his doctor, and he declares that his complaint is one of the Heart and it is impossible), and if all the advantages of this condition are

properly stated and dwelt upon to him, do you think he could resist me? And if he could not resist *me*, do you think his daughter could resist *him?* Shouldn't I have her Mrs. Arthur Gride — pretty Mrs. Arthur Gride — a tit-bit — a dainty chick — shouldn't I have her Mrs. Arthur Gride in a week, a month, a day — any time I chose to name?"

"Go on," said Ralph, nodding his head deliberately, and speaking in a tone whose studied coldness presented a strange contrast to the rapturous squeak to which his friend had gradually mounted. "Go on. You didn't come here to ask me that."

"Oh dear, how you talk!" cried old Arthur, edging himself closer still to Ralph. "Of course, I didn't — I don't pretend I did! I came to ask what you would take from me, if I prospered with the father, for this debt of yours — five shillings in the pound — six and eightpence — ten shillings? I *would* go as far as ten for such a friend as you, we have always been on such good terms, but you won't be so hard upon me as that, I know. Now, will you?"

"There's something more to be told," said Ralph, as stony and immovable as ever.

"Yes, yes, there is, but you won't give me time," returned Arthur Gride. "I want a backer in this matter — one who can talk, and urge, and press a point, which you can do as no man can. I can't do that, for I am a poor, timid, nervous creature. Now, if you get a good composition for this debt, which you long ago gave up for lost, you'll stand my friend, and help me. Won't you?"

"There's something more," said Ralph.

"No, no, indeed," cried Arthur Gride.

"Yes, yes, indeed. I tell you yes," said Ralph.

"Oh!" returned old Arthur, feigning to be suddenly enlightened. "You mean something more, as concerns myself and my intention. Aye, surely, surely. Shall I mention that?"

"I think you had better," rejoined Ralph, dryly.

"I didn't like to trouble you with that, because I supposed your interest would cease with your own concern in the affair," said Arthur Gride. "That's kind of you to ask. Oh dear, how very kind of you! Why, supposing I had a knowledge of some property — some little property — very little — to which this pretty chick was entitled; which nobody does or can know of at this time, but which her husband could sweep into his pouch, if he knew as much as I do, would that account for" ——

"For the whole proceeding," rejoined Ralph, abruptly. "Now, let me turn this matter over, and consider what I ought to have if I should help you to success."

"But don't be hard," cried old Arthur, raising his hands with an imploring gesture, and speaking in a tremulous voice. "Don't be too hard upon me. It's a very small property, it is indeed. Say the ten shillings, and we'll close the bargain. It's more than I ought to give, but you're so kind — shall we say the ten? Do now, do."

Ralph took no notice of these supplications, but sat for three or four minutes in a brown study, looking thoughtfully at the person from whom they proceeded. After sufficient cogitation he broke silence, and it certainly could not be objected that he used any needless circumlocution, or failed to speak directly to the purpose.

"If you married this girl without me," said Ralph, "you must pay my debt in full, because you couldn't set her father free otherwise. It's plain, then, that I

must have the whole amount, clear of all deduction or incumbrance, or I should lose from being honored with your confidence, instead of gaining by it. That's the first article of the treaty. For the second, I shall stipulate that for my trouble in negotiation and persuasion, and helping you to this fortune, I have five hundred pounds — that's very little, because you have the ripe lips, and the clustering hair, and what not, all to yourself. For the third and last article, I require that you execute a bond to me, this day, binding yourself in the payment of these two sums, before noon of the day of your marriage with Madeline Bray. You have told me I can urge and press a point. I press this one, and will take nothing less than these terms. Accept them if you like. If not, marry her without me if you can. I shall still get my debt."

To all entreaties, protestations, and offers of compromise between his own proposals and those which Arthur Gride had first suggested, Ralph was deaf as an adder. He would enter into no further discussion of the subject, and while old Arthur dilated upon the enormity of his demands and proposed modifications of them, approaching by degrees nearer and nearer to the terms he resisted, sat perfectly mute, looking with an air of quiet abstraction over the entries and papers in his pocket-book. Finding that it was impossible to make any impression upon his stanch friend, Arthur Gride, who had prepared himself for some such result before he came, consented with a heavy heart to the proposed treaty, and upon the spot filled up the bond required (Ralph kept such instruments handy), after exacting the condition that Mr. Nickleby should accompany him to Bray's lodgings that very hour, and open the negotiation at

once, should circumstances appear auspicious and favorable to their designs.

In pursuance of this last understanding the worthy gentlemen went out together shortly afterwards, and Newman Noggs emerged, bottle in hand, from the cupboard, out of the upper door of which, at the imminent risk of detection, he had more than once thrust his red nose when such parts of the subject were under discussion as interested him most.

"I have no appetite now," said Newman, putting the flask in his pocket. "I've had *my* dinner."

Having delivered this observation in a very grievous and doleful tone, Newman reached the door in one long limp, and came back again in another.

"I don't know who she may be, or what she may be," he said; "but I pity her with all my heart and soul; and I can't help her, nor can I any of the people against whom a hundred tricks — but none so vile as this — are plotted every day! Well, that adds to my pain, but not to theirs. The thing is no worse because I know it, and it tortures me as well as them. Gride and Nickleby! Good pair for a curricle — oh roguery! roguery! roguery!"

With these reflections, and a very hard knock on the crown of his unfortunate hat at each repetition of the last word, Newman Noggs, whose brain was a little muddled by so much of the contents of the pocket-pistol as had found their way there during his recent concealment, went forth to seek such consolation as might be derivable from the beef and greens of some cheap eating-house.

Meanwhile the two plotters had betaken themselves to the same house whither Nicholas had repaired for the

first time but a few mornings before, and having obtained access to Mr. Bray, and found his daughter from home, had by a train of the most masterly approaches that Ralph's utmost skill could frame, at length laid open the real object of their visit.

"There he sits, Mr. Bray," said Ralph, as the invalid, not yet recovered from his surprise, reclined in his chair, looking alternately at him and Arthur Gride. "What if he has had the ill-fortune to be one cause of your detention in this place — I have been another; men must live; you are too much a man of the world not to see that in its true light. We offer the best reparation in our power. Reparation! Here is an offer of marriage, that many a titled father would leap at, for his child. Mr. Arthur Gride, with the fortune of a prince. Think what a haul it is!"

"My daughter, sir," returned Bray, haughtily, "as *I* have brought her up, would be a rich recompense for the largest fortune that a man could bestow in exchange for her hand."

"Precisely what I told you," said the artful Ralph, turning to his friend, old Arthur. "Precisely what made me consider the thing so fair and easy. There is no obligation on either side. You have money, and Miss Madeline has beauty and worth. She has youth, you have money. She has not money, you have not youth. Tit for tat — quits — a match of Heaven's own making!"

"Matches are made in Heaven, they say," added Arthur Gride, leering hideously at the father-in-law he wanted. "If we are married, it will be destiny, according to that."

"Then think, Mr. Bray," said Ralph, hastily substitut-

ing for this argument considerations more nearly allied to earth, "Think what a stake is involved in the acceptance or rejection of these proposals of my friend" ——

"How can I accept or reject," interrupted Mr. Bray, with an irritable consciousness that it really rested with him to decide. "It is for my daughter to accept or reject; it is for my daughter. You know that."

"True," said Ralph, emphatically; "but you have still the power to advise; to state the reasons for and against; to hint a wish."

"To hint a wish, sir!" returned the debtor, proud and mean by turns, and selfish at all times. "I am her father, am I not? Why should I hint, and beat about the bush? Do you suppose, like her mother's friends and my enemies — a curse upon them all — that there is anything in what she has done for me but duty, sir, but duty? Or do you think that my having been unfortunate is a sufficient reason why our relative positions should be changed, and that she should command and I should obey? Hint a wish, too! Perhaps you think because you see me in this place and scarcely able to leave this chair without assistance, that I am some broken-spirited dependent creature, without the courage or power to do what I may think best for my own child. Still the power to hint a wish! I hope so!"

"Pardon me," returned Ralph, who thoroughly knew his man, and had taken his ground accordingly; "you do not hear me out. I was about to say that your hinting a wish — even hinting a wish — would surely be equivalent to commanding."

"Why, of course it would," retorted Mr. Bray, in an exasperated tone. "If you don't happen to have heard of the time, sir, I tell you that there was a time, when I

carried every point in triumph against her mother's whole family, although they had power and wealth on their side — by my will alone."

"Still," rejoined Ralph, as mildly as his nature would allow him, "you have not heard me out. You are a man yet qualified to shine in society, with many years of life before you — that is, if you lived in freer air, and under brighter skies, and chose your own companions. Gayety is your element, you have shone in it before. Fashion and freedom for you. France, and an annuity that would support you there in luxury, would give you a new lease of life — transfer you to a new existence. The town rang with your expensive pleasures once, and you could blaze up on a new scene again, profiting by experience, and living a little at others' cost, instead of letting others live at yours. What is there on the reverse side of the picture? What is there? I don't know which is the nearest church-yard, but a gravestone there, wherever it is, and a date — perhaps two years hence, perhaps twenty. That's all."

Mr. Bray rested his elbow on the arm of his chair, and shaded his face with his hand.

"I speak plainly," said Ralph, sitting down beside him, "because I feel strongly. It's my interest that you should marry your daughter to my friend Gride, because then he sees me paid — in part, that is. I don't disguise it. I acknowledge it openly. But what interest have you in recommending her to such a step? Keep that in view. She might object, remonstrate, shed tears, talk of his being too old, and plead that her life would be rendered miserable. But what is it now?"

Several slight gestures on the part of the invalid, showed that these arguments were no more lost upon

him, than the smallest iota of his demeanor was upon Ralph.

"What is it now, I say," pursued the wily usurer, "or what has it a chance of being? If you died, indeed, the people you hate would make her happy. But can you bear the thought of that?"

"No!" returned Bray, urged by a vindictive impulse he could not repress.

"I should imagine not, indeed!" said Ralph, quietly. "If she profits by anybody's death," this was said in a lower tone, "let it be by her husband's — don't let her have to look back to yours, as the event from which to date a happier life. Where is the objection? Let me hear it stated. What is it? That her suitor is an old man. Why, how often do men of family and fortune, who haven't your excuse, but have all the means and superfluities of life within their reach — how often do they marry their daughters to old men, or (worse still) to young men without heads or hearts, to tickle some idle vanity, strengthen some family interest, or secure some seat in Parliament! Judge for her, sir, judge for her. You must know best, and she will live to thank you."

"Hush! hush!" cried Mr. Bray, suddenly starting up, and covering Ralph's mouth with his trembling hand. "I hear her at the door!"

There was a gleam of conscience in the shame and terror of this hasty action, which, in one short moment, tore the thin covering of sophistry from the cruel design, and laid it bare in all its meanness and heartless deformity. The father fell into his chair pale and trembling; Arthur Gride plucked and fumbled at his hat, and durst not raise his eyes from the floor; even Ralph

crouched for the moment like a beaten hound, cowed by the presence of one young innocent girl!

The effect was almost as brief as sudden. Ralph was the first to recover himself, and observing Madeline's looks of alarm, entreated the poor girl to be composed, assuring her that there was no cause for fear.

"A sudden spasm," said Ralph, glancing at Mr. Bray. "He is quite well now."

It might have moved a very hard and worldly heart to see the young and beautiful creature, whose certain misery they had been contriving but a minute before, throw her arms about her father's neck, and pour forth words of tender sympathy and love, the sweetest a father's ear can know, or child's lips form. But Ralph looked coldly on; and Arthur Gride, whose bleared eyes gloated only over the outward beauties, and were blind to the spirit which reigned within, evinced — a fantastic kind of warmth certainly, but not exactly that kind of warmth of feeling which the contemplation of virtue usually inspires.

"Madeline," said her father, gently disengaging himself, "it was nothing."

"But you had that spasm yesterday, and it is terrible to see you in such pain. Can I do nothing for you?"

"Nothing just now. Here are two gentlemen, Madeline, one of whom you have seen before. She used to say," added Mr. Bray, addressing Arthur Gride, "that the sight of you always made me worse. That was natural, knowing what she did, and only what she did, of our connection and its results. Well, well. Perhaps she may change her mind on that point; girls have leave to change their minds, you know. You are very tired, my dear."

"I am not, indeed."

"Indeed you are. You do too much."

"I wish I could do more."

"I know you do, but you overtask your strength. This wretched life, my love, of daily labor and fatigue, is more than you can bear, I am sure it is. Poor Madeline!"

With these and many more kind words, Mr. Bray drew his daughter to him and kissed her cheek affectionately. Ralph, watching him sharply and closely in the mean time, made his way towards the door, and signed to Gride to follow him.

"You will communicate with us again," said Ralph.

"Yes, yes," returned Mr. Bray, hastily thrusting his daughter aside. "In a week. Give me a week."

"One week," said Ralph, turning to his companion, "from to-day. Good-morning. Miss Madeline, I kiss your hand."

"We will shake hands, Gride," said Mr. Bray, extending his, as old Arthur bowed. "You mean well, no doubt. I am bound to say so now. If I owed you money, that was not your fault. Madeline, my love — your hand here."

"Oh dear! If the young lady would condescend — only the tips of her fingers" — said Arthur, hesitating and half retreating.

Madeline shrunk involuntarily from the goblin figure, but she placed the tips of her fingers in his hand and instantly withdrew them. After an ineffectual clutch, intended to detain and carry them to his lips, old Arthur gave his own fingers a mumbling kiss, and with many amorous distortions of visage went in pursuit of his friend, who was by this time in the street.

"What does he say, what does he say — what does the giant say to the pigmy?" inquired Arthur Gride, hobbling up to Ralph.

"What does the pigmy say to the giant?" rejoined Ralph, elevating his eyebrows and looking down upon his questioner.

"He doesn't know what to say," replied Arthur Gride. "He hopes and fears. But is she not a dainty morsel?"

"I have no great taste for beauty," growled Ralph.

"But I have," rejoined Arthur, rubbing his hands. "Oh dear! How handsome her eyes looked when she was stooping over him — such long lashes — such delicate fringe! She — she — looked at me so soft."

"Not over-lovingly, I think?" said Ralph. "Did she?"

"No you think not?" replied old Arthur. "But don't you think it can be brought about — don't you think it can?"

Ralph looked at him with a contemptuous frown, and replied with a sneer, and between his teeth —

"Did you mark his telling her she was tired and did too much, and overtasked her strength?"

"Aye, aye. What of it?"

"When do you think he ever told her that before? The life is more than she can bear. Yes, yes. He'll change it for her."

"D'ye think it's done?" inquired old Arthur, peering into his companion's face with half-closed eyes.

"I am sure it's done," said Ralph. "He is trying to deceive himself, even before our eyes, already — making believe that he thinks of her good and not his own — acting a virtuous part, and so considerate and

affectionate, sir, that the daughter scarcely knew him. I saw a tear of surprise in her eye. There'll be a few more tears of surprise there before long, though of a different kind. Oh! we may wait with confidence for this day week."

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